

Ministry

An Outsider's Perspective



At the outset of this project I had no appreciation of what ‘ministry’ entailed. I wasn’t (then) a churchgoer and my professional background consists of 35 years in international business, a world apart from that of ministry.

Having spent a year with Kit, I have inevitably made a number of personal observations and conclusions about ministry today: the difference that ministry can make; the nature and challenges of the role; and what it takes to succeed.

'Trust in God's will'



Ministry is full of challenges.

In part this is because of the nature of the role: the breadth of the scope of ministry; its emotional demands; being 'permanently on call' and never leaving your work behind (given that your home is also your work-place); and being the local representative of an organisation that is currently wrestling with a variety of challenges.

But further challenges for Kit are the modest size of his worshipping community and the low income of his parish. Although he has 2 fellow ministers, and a dedicated band of volunteers who give their time gladly, Kit has little in the way of a structured organisation on which to rely. And St James' currently generates an annual deficit, whilst significant funding is needed to fix the roof.

So what does it take to stay motivated and provide spiritual inspiration and leadership? At one level, emotional strength, resolve and determination. But what ultimately sustains Kit is the strength of his faith, his trust in God, and his belief that everything, however hard to understand, 'is God's will'.

‘Ministry is all about people’



Ministry requires a very particular skill: to be able to emotionally and spiritually connect with anyone...of all ages, classes, backgrounds, interests, and circumstances...and at all moments of their lives, including their 'soaring highs' and their 'deepest lows'.

Not an easy thing for any individual to do.

'Jack of all trades'



I have rarely come across a 'job spec' that is so seemingly boundary-less!

From providing spiritual leadership at the most intense and intimate times... leading a funeral, or providing comfort to a middle-aged parishioner with terminal cancer.

Through to roles familiar to those in business...developing a 5 year plan, leading various committees, marketing to potential 'new customers', taking responsibility for the church finances (including, in this case, investment portfolio management) and buildings.

And then all of the 'day to day'...anything from dealing with a flooded church basement; creating and managing the website; ensuring that the fish and chips turn up for the quiz night on time; folding leaflets...and much, much more.

Quite some role profile: Chief Executive; Finance Director; Marketing Director; Sales Director; Human Resources Director; and Operations Director...all in one!

The opportunity to make a profound difference - - especially to those in need



One of the aspects of the role that Kit finds most fulfilling and enjoyable are his pastoral visits: visiting those in need in their homes, hospitals, or care homes. And having accompanied Kit on many of these, I have seen for myself the huge difference that they make.

Imagine. You are in need...you have faith. Kit comes to you. He chats...he reads the bible...he prays with you...he may sing to you...he gives you Communion. He gives you his undivided attention, time and love.

Kit always leaves the recipient emotionally stronger, sometimes quite visibly, than when he arrived. What a wonderful gift to be able to give. Many in business would love to be able to make such a profound impact on those that they lead.

The power of prayer



One of the things that struck me early on was how 'prayer' is just a way of life for Kit...at all times, and in all places, and praying for all manner of things whether it be with groups (maybe just praying 'for a good meeting') or individuals.

Kit has a wonderful touch when it comes to praying with individuals. He will listen to someone tell their story...what's on their mind...what they are dealing with. And when they are finished he will ask, in a wonderfully understated way, 'Shall we say a prayer?' or 'Shall we pray?'.

And then out will flow a truly personalised prayer, filled with detail that includes so much of the conversation that he has been party to, which might have lasted a few minutes or half an hour, or even longer.

An extraordinary skill of listening, remembering (including often lots of names!), and assembling an inspiring narrative without any notes or preparation. And hugely uplifting for the recipient; I know, having been the beneficiary on a couple of occasions.

It is, at times, a lonely job



A large part of Kit's time is spent, on his own, working in his vicarage office. Of course there is significant social interaction every Sunday, and during the working week he's out and about in his Parish, visiting communities and parishioners in their homes, and engaging with fellow local clergy on shared agendas. But there's still a lot of solitary time.

There's also an element of being a 'sole practitioner' (even though he has a small team working with him at St James'); he's given significant autonomy over how he chooses to fulfil his ministry, and meetings with his 'boss' are infrequent.

All in all, a working life quite different to what many of us are used to and very different from the daily and on-going social interaction that I have experienced as part of my own working life.

The difference that music makes



Kit is a passionate (and talented) guitarist and singer and quick to add music to his ministry, whether in his church, care homes, or people's homes. I have been struck by the difference that music makes to his ministry.

Thus when Kit has one of his (few!) Sundays 'off', the church service feels as though it is lacking something...and his guitar and singing seem to provide a focal point in care homes, with most joining in as best they are able.

Four of us singing 'Silent Night' to Ensel, as she lay in her care-home bed, was unexpectedly moving for me (a nurse stopped in the corridor to witness the scene, and stayed through to the end).

'It's more than bums on seats'



One of the obvious measures of success, both for the Church of England as a whole, and for an individual Parish priest, is church attendance ('bums on seats') and this is currently in long-term decline. Kit's average Sunday attendance in 2015 was unchanged at 51 versus 2014...a relative success on this basis. The CoE's Renewal and Reform agenda seeks to address this, along with other challenges facing the Church.

But having seen what the Church of England and ministers like Kit can offer, beyond the Sunday service, I have been struck by the significant and valuable difference they can make to society in terms of, for example, contributions to Foodbanks, pastoral visits, school connections...and especially in terms of offering a caring and welcoming community to those who want or need it, even if it just involves offering the opportunity to drop in to Kit's church for a cup of tea and a friendly chat.

‘You don’t do this for the money’



A common refrain amongst clergy!

Of course financial reward is not a consideration when you enter ministry. But I was surprised by how low the salary is, given the nature of the role and its 'professional status'. The standard stipend in Southwark was £25,000 in 2015 - - although there are other benefits, such as the free use of a vicarage, and long-term job security.

It requires Kit to make financial choices and compromises as do, of course, many of his parishioners. At times in their lives Kit and his wife went around Sainsbury's with their calculator to ensure that they stayed within their budget.

Representing an organisation facing its own challenges



As a parish priest, Kit is the appointed local representative of the Church of England and thus its 'local face'. He's the local 'foot-soldier'.

The Church of England is wrestling with multiple challenges: declining CoE attendances; decreasing public trust in the clergy; positions that appear to some to be out of touch with society, most notably same-sex marriage...to name just a few.

Kit's focus is on bringing his own ministry and spiritual leadership to the St James community, day in and day out, undistracted by the debates above - - just like his fellow 'foot soldiers' up and down the country.

But it's always more challenging to be inspirational as a local leader when the organisation you represent is itself challenged, and its success is in doubt (for some) in the public eye.