

Autobiographical Essay for Transforming Ministry

My Christian pilgrimage began when, aged about ten years, with my young brother, I walked, each Sunday morning, the half-mile or so to our Grandmother's house, and thence to her local parish church, for the 11:00 o'clock service. This church was at the Anglo Catholic end of the liturgical spectrum, and I fell in love with it. The clergy wore full, Eucharistic vestments and birettas, the choir sang the Mass, often in Latin, numerous altar servers assembled, crosses, lights and banners were formed up into processions, bells were rung, hymns were gloriously sung, and, to quote from the Sixth Chapter of the Prophecy of Isaiah, 'the house was filled with smoke'. Later, during my teenage years, a new church was built on the western edge of our expanding town, and its first incumbent was a Kelham Father, who, like all who received their priestly formation with the Society of the Sacred Mission, provided what was loosely called High Church forms of worship. With other school friends I was introduced to serving in the sanctuary, a liturgical discipline that has lasted and matured throughout my life.

I married Jan in 1970. Our first family home was in a small village of some 150 inhabitants, in rural Suffolk. This community had, at its centre, a very large, stone and flint built, 'wool' church, which dated back to the twelfth century. We quickly became integrated into rural and church life and I progressively took on the roles of server, sacristan, sexton and ultimately churchwarden of this, traditional, Anglo-Catholic Church. In 1976 the PCC agreed that I should be proposed for Lay Reader training, and, after being interviewed by the Diocesan Warden of Readers, I was given a probationary licence. However, before my training could begin, I was made redundant, and, after a prolonged search, I obtained employment in a manufacturing company in Blackburn, Lancashire. The managerial demands involved in overcoming many teething difficulties in a green-field, state-of-the-art factory put all thoughts of Readership training on to the backburner. However, our now expanded family quickly fell in love with the worship at Blackburn Cathedral, and we all played our various parts in its life. For a decade I had responsibility for the training and duty rostering of a band of some 14 to 15 altar servers.

In 1999 my wife and I retired to the Inner Hebridean Isle of Mull, where we had had a holiday home for a decade. Previously, as holidaying visitors, we had regularly worshipped at the local Scottish Episcopal Church, dedicated to St Columba. After one service, early in 2002, the Vestry Secretary (=PCC Secretary) announced that there would be no service on the following Sunday because there was nobody to lead it. The worshipping tradition was for summer Sunday services to be celebrated by visiting, holidaying priests, who received financially subsidised accommodation, as a sort of 'thank you'. Winter Sundays had traditionally been the concern of a mainland priest who had an itinerant responsibility for us, but he had recently retired. I told the Secretary, rather tongue-in-cheek, that I held a probationary Reader's licence, and could I help. She asked me whether I would be prepared to offer Prayer Book Matins. I was delighted to oblige. Other requests followed and I was later asked by our bishop whether I would be prepared to provide a lay-led form of Eucharistic worship, administering consecrated elements from the Reserved Sacrament, which he, living on the mainland in Oban, would consecrate for me. I was delighted to accept.

So began the next part of my Christian pilgrimage. However, it quickly became clear to me that if I was to preach to this congregation, I had better know what I was talking about. Later that year I enrolled as a part-time, distance-learning, student at the University of Aberdeen and, in 2009, gained a B Th degree, with Upper Second Class Honours. My academic studies continued with five years as a part-time student at the University of Glasgow, researching the life and principal writings of Benedictine monk, theologian and liturgist, Dom Gregory Dix (1901-1952), for which I was awarded a Ph D in 2014.

Reader ministry in the Hebrides differs from that found in most dioceses in the Church of England. Mull is very large; it has 300 miles of coastline. When one member of our congregation was sick, I made the 100 miles, round trip, mostly on single-track roads from our church to his home to take him the Sacrament. I was asked by the son of a large, elderly, house-bound lady of Scandinavian origin, to whom I had regularly taken the Sacrament in her declining years, whether I would conduct her funeral service, but in his house, not in church. When I arrived I found that she was in a casket made from intertwined willow branches, which rested on a table in the sitting room. During the service, members of her family, following a Norse

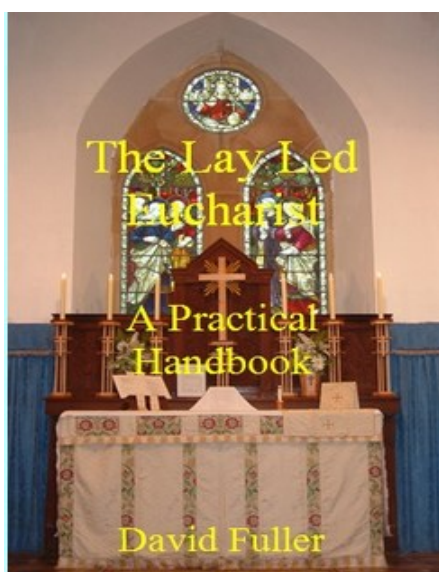
tradition, threaded fresh flowers into the coffin's woven structure. The interment was in a cemetery several miles away across the island, one that I had never visited. I had to leave it to the six muscular bearers to lead the way up the hillside, while I followed on, reciting the Prayer Book sentences. With every step the base of the coffin sagged lower, and I had the dread thought that, at any moment, the occupant would crash through on to the ground or drop unceremoniously into the grave. In the end all was well. So concluded another day in the life of an island-based Reader.

There is also a sense of loneliness. In my active years I only knew of two other Readers in this enormous diocese (there may have been others), one in Campbeltown at the southern tip of the Mull of Kintyre, the other on the Isle of Cumbrae. In my Charge the Cure of Souls was held by a mainland-based priest, 75 miles away on the mainland. There was little evidence of a Priest and Reader partnership, no one nearby to offer advice, give encouragement or to answer questions. While in part suffering from isolation, my autonomy gave me considerable freedom of action. I introduced extra services, for Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, Ascension Day, Corpus Christi and for Advent and Christmass Carols. I can offer the following statistics:

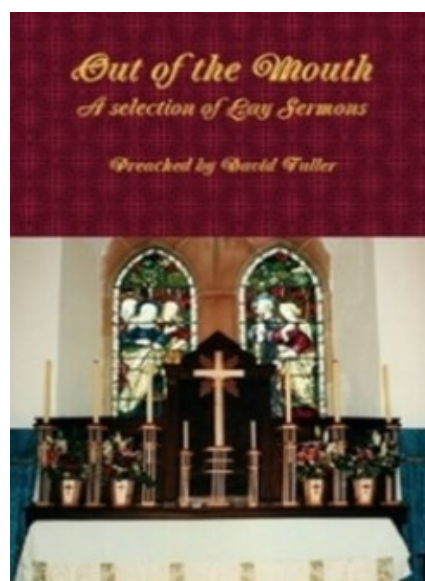
Matins	31
Evensongs	9
Carol services	17
Holy Communions	161
Total services	218
Sermons preached	159
Communicants	2913
Total attendance	4144

Congregations at my Eucharistic services included many holidaying priests, including a diocesan bishop, an emeritus dean, and, on one sunny, summer, Sunday morning, the, then, Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church (= our Archbishop). I am especially heartened that nearly three thousand communicants have received the Blessed Sacrament; never have I experienced anyone refusing it in my lay-led services.

Since retiring from active service, I have written and published several theological books, including: *The Lay Led Eucharist: A Practical Handbook*, and one of sermons, covering much of the Church's Calendar, entitled *Out of the Mouth: A Selection of Lay Sermons*. Both are available from Lulu Press Inc. See my website www.davidjfuller.co.uk for more information.



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