

Extending the role of the laity

I recently came across an interesting statistic. In the first eight weeks of this Christian year (from the First Sunday in Advent to the end of January) over 250 people attended services at Saint Columba, Gruline, on the Isle of Mull: only 25 (10%) of them met or saw an ordained priest. The vast majority were led in their corporate worship by local laypersons. Our lay led offerings included: several services of the Holy Eucharist, two Carol Festivals and Matins (including a joint, ecumenical service in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity). These simple facts led me to spend some time pondering on the role of the laity in our church life.

As the costs of administration of the diocese continue to rise (and rise they most assuredly will), and demands upon those limited resources continue to increase (much of it from the introduction of spurious and often unnecessary legislation), the funding available for the maintenance of stipendiary clergy will proportionately fall. This diocese, along with many others, has seen significant increases in pension costs for all paid staff, and housing costs, both for purchase and maintenance, continue to rise. Travelling expenses, especially in this area of widely scattered, small and island communities, cannot but go up. Our priest-in-charge lives in Glencoe, fifty miles and two ferry crossings away from Mull! Where does all that leave the church and its small but faithful, worshipping congregations?

A trawl through the current Prayer Cycle indicates that the diocese has seven stipendiary clergy (including the bishop) and 12 non-stipendiaries (many now retired from earlier duties). There are about 20 named laypersons, some of them formally recognised as Lay Chaplains and Lay Readers, and others who are called lay leaders or who are just names on the pages as those who assist in leading public worship. There are, I am sure, many others whose names are not included, who offer prayer services, lead choir offices or undertake valuable, pastoral work.

However great the number of laypersons assisting the clergy in the provision (particularly) of public worship, it will never be sufficient. How many charges, that ought to have services every Sunday, have them every fortnight, or, worse, once per month? What happens on Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Ascension Day and Corpus Christi when clergy numbers are clearly insufficient for services in all our churches on these important days? What about Saints' Days? I am not for one moment suggesting that our clergy, both paid and unpaid, do not work hard, but they cannot be everywhere on every important feast day, especially when considering the several demands of travelling appreciable distances. The requirements of our congregations, and the obligation of all Christians to participate in regular and frequent corporate worship, cannot be met, nor will be met, by our clergy, regardless of how many hours they work or how few days they have for themselves. With the help of our many retired priests, we manage – but should we have to depend so heavily on those who have already 'run the race'?

There are only three activities that are unique to the ordained clergy. I like to refer to them as the 'ABC' of priesthood – they comprise Absolution, Blessing and Consecration. It is obvious that the church cannot exist without these activities; the very core of our sacramental life depends on them. If this is the case, then where do the laity fit into the picture? The leading of the choir offices of Matins and Evensong, including any associated sermons, does not require any priestly activity, and most lay leaders (of whatever title) regularly offer these services. But, you don't have to be a fully paid-up member of this select number to offer public worship – you only have to be a fully paid-up member of the church, with some training and episcopal approval. But our church cannot and should not exist on a diet of choir offices between increasingly infrequent Eucharistic visits by the clergy. Every

church member should have the opportunity of receiving the sacrament every Sunday, and at other times, and without having to travel to neighbouring, and often distant, churches. (God forbid that we should ever have to resort to a Eucharistomat!). The Holy Eucharist can be conducted (and I use this word to disassociate it from a priestly celebration) by any competent layperson. All that is needed is some training and the provision of pre-consecrated (reserved) sacramental elements. We have had much success on Mull with frequent, lay led Eucharistic services for over five years. Without them, for example, our many Christmass-tide and New Year visitors would not have received their Communion.

Bishop Martin has promoted a renewal of stewardship in 2007. Stewardship is about time, talents and treasures and our offering of **all** of these to God. Many of those who read this report have talents and time to give to God; especially talents that can be focused into extending the sacramental life of their churches. If you are one-such, or even if you are unsure if you are one-such, then talk to your priest or your bishop about training for this important sacerdotal work. You will, I promise, get a very sympathetic hearing. The spiritual uplift you will receive from conducting a sacramental service in your church has no parallel.

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