

Leadership

In 1995 Rick Warren from Saddleback Community Church in California wrote a book entitled “The Purpose Driven Church”. It was hailed at the time as a textbook in the study of church growth based as it was on his own personal experience of starting with one family and fifteen years later having a weekly worshipping congregation of 10,000. Like many others I started to read with interest hoping to filter out the Californian cultural aspects and find what useful principles remained. Imagine my dismay when I got to Page 31 and read this emphatic statement *“Churches that rotate pastors every few years will never experience consistent growth.”* You can understand what a Methodist made of that - because of course that is precisely what we do and have done since our earliest days.

In Wesley’s day, before Methodism became a church in its own right, his preachers were appointed for only a year before being moved to another area. Lacking in formal theological education, as many of them were, it was felt that they would get through their limited sermon repertoire in that time and then be able to start again elsewhere. As Methodism developed and expectations increased, a minister’s length of appointment was extended to three years. As a child I remember my mother (who was not a Methodist) telling me that in her young day the popular saying about Methodist ministers was “First year idolised; second year criticised; third year scandalised”. Maybe in that setting three years were quite enough!! As time has gone on the normal length of appointment has grown to five years and currently to a possible eight years.

Other churches do it differently. In some parts of the island it’s not unusual to have the same minister or priest in a church for twenty or thirty years. The advantages are obvious. The leader sets a certain tone, establishes clear and understood priorities and follows long term plans. The congregation give their loyalty to a figure who they expect to be with them for the long haul. The shepherd knows the flock extremely well and is there for people as all the major family and life events unfold.

The trouble arises of course when such a leader dies, retires or decides to move away. In some denominations it can take up to a couple of years for a successor to be found. In Baptist and Presbyterian churches the congregation will vote for the new minister usually after hearing them preach. Can you imagine what that must be like for a prospective candidate! However you dress it up in language about finding the person of God’s choice, the fact remains that the minister is the appointee of the congregation. That creates a real danger that he or she will want to please people rather than having the courage to say what needs to be said. It’s hard to be a prophet and say courageous things to people who are paying your salary and can hire and fire you.

Our Methodist system is different. Ministers are appointed by Conference. At ordination they have undertaken to “go where they are sent”. The Stationing Committee does its best to put the right person together with the right congregation by all sorts of consultations and conversations but the bottom line is that a minister is sent to us by the Methodist Church in Ireland. A minister comes with that authority. Each one brings with them something of the wider Church – not least the wisdom and experience gained from working in a variety of different settings and situations.

Methodism’s way of rotating ministers has many advantages. It means that every so many years we have to be prepared for change. Each minister will come with their own set of priorities and emphases and often this saves us from getting stuck in the same old grooves and ruts. A newcomer

can spot gaps in our provision and opportunities for mission in ways that those lay people who have been around for years find it difficult to do. Most Methodist people will rise to the occasion and do their best to support and get behind their new leader. That has got to be good for a congregation.

On the other hand our system carries with it the danger that as a local church we are so focused on the minister that we lurch from one strategy to the next depending on who is sent to us. One time the emphasis might be on evangelism, another time on developing the premises, another time on community action - according to the vision and drive of the current minister. That is a recipe for confusion and frustration as people who have given their all to a project find it side lined under a new incumbent who has different ideas.

Surely if Connexions has taught us anything at all it is that the leadership of a church must be a team effort. The local leaders and the Church Council must be the ones to identify what they see as their church's mission in their community. When that happens then the new minister is able to come alongside, give input and help work towards agreed goals. In this way the work goes forward, the minister getting alongside the leaders "equipping the saints for the work of ministry" rather than labouring under the impossible burden of feeling that it all rests on him or her.

Let's face it – it doesn't always work. Sometimes a minister may do the best they can and never really feel that they are totally at home in a church. Sometimes it is individual members who harbour doubts about the suitability of their minister. Sometimes the wrong people are voted onto councils. We all understand that. The wonder is how, despite what Rick Warren says about rotating pastors, God continues to give us leaders, ordained and lay, to carry forward His work.