

**'Fear Not Little Flock'  
The Vocation of Minority Churches Today**

Session Four : Involving the Laity

**Church as a Wisdom Community:  
Gathered, Blessed and Dispersed for the Sake of the Kingdom**

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## **A View from a Point**

*I've been keenly looking forward to this gathering. The themes we are exploring seem so timely. As an Anglican priest, for 44 years, mostly within the Church of England, I've served in parishes, cathedrals and diocesan education teams. I've also been fortunate to have ecumenical links with several other parts of the world, not least with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in New York. And now, as William Leech Research Fellow at Durham University, I have close contact with five particular churches in the North of England – Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic. So, my speaking today arises from observation and reflection on this rich, but limited, set of phenomena. Only together, from our varying traditions, contexts and perspectives, can we conspire to become the change we believe God desires.*

### **I. CHURCH: a Wisdom Community**

#### **Finding how to be church again**

For the first time in centuries the churches in Britain are not bolstered by secular powers. It's time to recognize that the Christendom form of Church could only deliver what it was designed to do. Society now, largely finds it no longer "fit for purpose". Facing up to ways in which the Church has degenerated into a clerical hierarchy is a stimulant for rediscovering its character as an organic body of integral parts. Released from ingrained attitudes, our vocation now is to be a humbler presence. That is to recognize ourselves as disciples of Jesus, connected to the worldwide spiritual search for the common good of creation.

A current strand in Anglican studies is exploring the concept of theology as always to be "found". The Holy Spirit constantly goes forward, just over the horizon, leaving its traces in the events of history, ours to be found over and over again in every new situation. 'Found Theology' awakens in churches the potential to bypass adversarial and rigid patterns of relating. Genuine mutual attention provides a more fertile ground for ecumenical and inter-faith studies and practice.

Led by the Spirit, the form of Church does not come predetermined, but is always to be found. The context of belief in Britain now, in a blend of continuity and discontinuity with the past, is more complex than any single person or group can name. My understanding is that to meet the precarious situation for both our society and churches, it is essential to increase both the intensity of Christian experience and the extensity of our involvement with God in the world. The way ahead, rooted in the trinitarian template of reality as face to face communication, will be found as ecumenical and inter-faith partnership. I'm inspired by Jeremiah (chapter 29) urging the exiles in Babylon to use the time profitably. Instead of complaining, they must reach deeper into relationship with God, as well as seeking the peace and prosperity of the society in which they are set. God has the future in his hands.

Often, as a visitor, I observe the practices churches take as the norm: portraying the laity, except for a small trusted inner group, primarily as recipients of liturgy and ministry. Church membership has declined precipitously during the past fifty years. As the age profile rises, churches fall into lament and even blame. “Where have all the people gone? Those choir stalls once were full. Every child in the village used to attend Sunday School”. As a former parish priest, and also parent and grandparent, I am keenly aware of the “lost” generations. The inherited churches, for centuries relied on new people being attracted to the liturgy and being converted by participation. The mainstream liberal approach to offering faith from one generation to the next, might be expressed as, “I’m not going to impose my faith and practice on you; you can choose for yourself at the right time”. Intended as deeply respectful, it reveals a complacency about the value of sharing a faith we claim to hold dear.

Thoughtful laity are concerned that their families have given up on Church and God. They also know that the intellectual climate of Europe and statistical surveys reveal a disillusionment with the God of Christianity and a profound suspicion that religion brings more conflict than peace. Thankfully, dissatisfaction is on the march. There is a growing recognition that the inheritance of the last millennium has left us with both an inadequate theology and practice of Church. Writing to Christians in Rome (12:5), Paul insists we are not just individually part of Christ’s body; we animate one another; we are one of another. A sustained fault is visible when the ordained act as the experts, aristocracy and even solo maintainers of the Church.

### **Wisdom Communities Formed in Blessing**

As a deliberate antidote to churches living in fear, I propose, as a leading theological category, the comprehensive scriptural notion of blessing. The richest wisdom (for example in the Book of Job) is to be found in God’s love of creation for its own sake, inviting humanity to love God for God’s own sake and other people for theirs. To live in wisdom before this God evokes a faith that grows through being desired and loved by God. Jesus, at his baptism, shows his followers that identity and purpose are to be found in daring to respond to the God who desires and loves almost overwhelmingly. Within this relationship the Holy Spirit elicits new ways of viewing the world. We are upheld and challenged to discover new possibilities. As Anglican lay theologian, David Ford, suggests, the core dynamic of Christian Wisdom is learning to live together in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of love for a God who is praised, thanked and blessed ‘for his name’s sake’ .

Intentionally living in communion within the ecology of God’s blessing is to seek a mutual dynamic between inherited and innovative patterns of Church. Blessing is the tap root of an abundant, cohesive, questioning, and generous ecclesiology. It originates in the mission of the

Trinity and touches every part of life. It draws together praise, joy, abundance, glory and the presence and activity of God in the world. But, for this to be completed in us we have to be in a state of readiness. Scripture shows (notably in the case of Jacob) how God's generous blessing has transformative power when recognized, desired and, in turn, offered to others.

God desires to draw us and form us to share in his mission in the whole of life. This goes beyond mechanics and strategy. It requires a new ethos. Within the texture of hope and despair of everyday church life, and for the sake of the Kingdom, we need to let God form us in purposeful values and communicative practices. As Franciscan Richard Rohr has written, "To hold questions *seriously* is much more a source of spiritual wisdom than to have quick and easy certitudes". The central proposal of this paper is that local churches consciously re-identify, through a dynamic of doctrine and practice, as Wisdom Communities. Society needs the witness of such schools of desire where we learn to love, make mistakes and seek reconciliation.

### **Values of a Wisdom Community**

My study and experience suggest that the values of a Wisdom Community might include that:

- God is often spoken of, without embarrassment,
- the Eucharist, praise and prayer, in a variety of communicative practices, remain central,
- new disciples are drawn in and nurtured through hospitality and learning.
- a wide range of ages and parts of society are welcomed,
- connectivity with other churches and faith groups is taken for granted
- the congregation can disagree within a spirit of Christian courtesy
- nothing happens in the neighbourhood or the world that is of no concern to the local church.

## **2. GATHERED: Present to our Deepest Source**

### **The Eucharistic Heartbeat**

The Church has this extraordinary gift of the Eucharist through which to show the world its true life. In local churches, as Wisdom Communities, seeking to be obedient to Christ, we could conceive of laity as blessed, placed, timed and commanded, especially through Eucharistic celebrations of many kinds. In gathering singing, being silent, adoring, beseeching, reading, sharing, embracing, praying, offering money, sharing bread and wine, and being sent away again, we learn, over a lifetime, to become communicators of God's work for the world's transformation.

Rightly we have an antipathy to becoming a sect of the likeminded. It's a sign of inner confidence and reliance on God when churches celebrate difference and pay attention to those considered to be marginal. But in a society fragmented by individualism and competition the local church must consciously develop its vocation to be an *oikos*, a household, where all are welcome and respected. Eucharistic communities are places for conversation, for learning to be loved and to love, for inviting guests and for being sent out from. This Church is a community that curates a space for all to experience holiness. Jesus, as servant-leader, confides in us, as "friends". A hospitable Church, talks *with*, rather than *at* people.

The growth of various forms of "Messy Church" has been made possible by this pilgrim notion of faith. Families are able to make tentative steps into church practice when the laity of the local church give time to offering welcome, food, conversation, and styles of learning and worship that consciously respect each person, inviting them into an open community network. The background shape of these events benefits from being eucharistic, as it contains the whole of the Gospel from gathering to being sent away. From this can spring Facebook and Twitter conversations on the Gospel for the week. Another example would be when a parish church enters into a partnership with local traders in a shopping mall for the celebration of Christmas or a summer fayre sponsored by the local churches and businesses, just for people to talk, eat and play together, and all without charge.

### **Living from the Hospitality of God**

Where the hidden life of congregations flourishes today it is often due to a renewed commitment to the ancient Christian tradition of hospitality. To be hospitable requires a home to which people can be invited with confidence. Mission as risky hospitality can lead congregations to reframe their sense of Church. Will this community welcome the baptism of a child when there seems so little faith in the parents? Are we willing to take the risk and keep in loving touch for the next ten years, offering ways into a new commitment without showing irritation or losing hope?

Through the habits of more intimate community, laity witness to the God who, despite our many refusals, constantly desires to draw us to the light. When such communities offer hospitality to an art school end of year exhibition, present an almost chaotic crib service or provide a venue for local charities to stage exhibitions there is a clear testimony to the ceaseless outgoing and return of the desiring God. Equally, when churches in an area live together confidently and joyfully in a spirit of Receptive Ecumenism, the Gospel is made known and the healing and reconciling ministry of Jesus is offered.

I have recognized this Christian response to the new landscape of today's world in a Methodist Church that opens its doors every day at the heart of a city. Those with a long tradition within that church, especially in reading Scripture and praying together, and through the ministry of a youth worker, have come to recognize their "grandparent" mission towards students and other young adults living in the city centre. They have mostly enjoyed having their own horizons expanded as a result of their hospitable initiatives.

### **Welcoming, Integrating and Caring**

Who loves us and who are we called to love? The classical-clerical way of pastoral care is still very much the norm and there is no devaluing of that ministry in a Wisdom Community. But to draw out active Christian ministry in all, some leaders must also be navigators, animators and companions. Some churches have begun to recognize how mutual care is simply what churches do. Any member of the Body, at different times, will be the minister and the one ministered to, sometimes guest and sometimes host. This is an expression of a corporate *episkope*, holding the Christlight for one another in the night-time of our fear.

There is the wider issue of how congregations take newcomers to the next step of belonging, leading them into experiencing healing and greater participation. I know of one church that has created a welcoming, integrating and caring group. Instead of appointing a lay pastoral team, a core group deliberately evokes ministry in all. Not denying the value of traditional conversations between laity and clergy, it also invites the laity to recognize new gifts within themselves, so that no one is defined permanently as needy recipients.

### **Learning from emerging churches**

Traditional churches can learn a tremendous amount from more youthful expressions of Church. Received in humility, they can be a source of blessing. For example, the Rutba House community, as an ecumenical and prophetic witness sets out to subvert dominating ways of relating. Their practices include radical sharing of resources, hospitality, social justice, mutual obedience, formation in Christ, community life, allowing for people of all ages, married and celibate, shared rule of life, ecological awareness, concern for peace and dedication to prayer. The new monasticism longs for the unity of all things in Christ, seeking virtues, habits and grace that can move humanity beyond accepting things as they are.

## Values of the Hospitable Church

A spirituality of hospitality might be summed up as calling the Church to the values of:

- serving others with deep respect for their values, talents and spiritual pathways
- fostering a round table form of hospitality where there are no centres and no margins, where guest and host are one
- taking conversation and mutual affirmations as keys to mission
- growing in humility through face to face communication with Jesus and especially his table hospitality

### 3. BLESSED: Blessed to become a Blessing

How can laity be supported to become more courageous leaders, artists, entrepreneurs and midwives of change?

#### Conversations of Hope

As a practical theology research fellow at the University of Durham, I am acting as companion to two Roman Catholic parishes, a city centre Methodist church and two Anglican parishes, one a former coal mining village and the other a vast 1960s housing estate. Experimenting with Appreciative Inquiry methodology I am fostering the practice of “Conversations of Hope”. The project has two interweaving strands, one for particular churches and the other for any church that wishes to make use of it in the future. My aim is to foster a new ethos of confidence rooted in receiving and becoming God’s blessing, to replace prevailing discourses of deficit.

Firstly, I am walking alongside each of the churches, separately, spending time there, preaching, teaching, listening to the leaders, and facilitating conversations of laity and clergy together. Occasionally I plan to invite participants from all five congregations to meet together to cross check their experiences, encourage one another and scale across ideas. For this I recruit several more group facilitators. An emerging question for the wider church is if facilitated conversations are beneficial to a trial group, how can this become available to many others?

Secondly, arising from this, I am preparing for publication a handbook of facilitated conversation outlines, based on Appreciative Inquiry methodology. This is to encourage churches to recognize the importance of transformational mutual inquiry. The resource book is to provide a tool to enable any church to use this process for developing the whole people of God together

as a Wisdom Community. The process of producing this resource is designed to be consistent with the operative theology of an ecology of blessing. In that spirit it will be critically road tested by a number of other churches before reaching its published form. I'd like now briefly to describe my experience of this work, hopefully as springboard for further reflection and questions.

### **A description of the Process**

One of the most moving moments for me was when a group was discussing how tough it can be for young teenagers to admit to peers at school that they were at church on Sunday. Commenting on this one of the older women in a congregation of some 30 people, said, "and don't let's forget that we old ones have to cope with seeming weird to our neighbours because we come up here to church on a Sunday".

I draw a clear distinction between "discussion" and "conversation". Across the churches there is an increasing involvement of laity in discussions about local church plans for evangelism, mission, liturgy, pastoral care, finance, and involvement in the community. I am deliberately avoiding the word "discussion", with its Latin roots in "cutting to pieces" your adversary, to prove a point. As a more positive alternative, I advocate the concept of conversation as "Appreciative Inquiry". Its character is to recognize the validity of each person's ideas and feelings. It stimulate curiosity, mutual support, and interconnection. It relies on people learning to be *present* to one another.

When I sit down with groups, asking where God is at work and how God's blessings are known in their experience, I often find a release of laughter, tears and new energy. This theory-practice approach combines process learning, liturgy, scripture and hospitality. It reveals the amazing capacity in the laity for growing as active contemplatives, disciples and missionaries. As one of the clergy in this project recently observed, "shy and often inarticulate Christians are blossoming through sharing their inner thoughts and aspirations". I've witnessed the possibilities that emerge in gatherings of 15-20 laity (with clergy and other leaders).

At a convenient time, in a space where intimate conversation is possible, significant conversation can take place. In an informal but structured two hour period, there is the gathering, introductions, prayer, scripture, simple teaching, conversation, shared refreshments, further thoughts, prayer and departure. Rather than seeming threatening, such gatherings can foster growth in confidence. Humour, gentleness and patience can encourage laity to work on themselves and let God be more present to them.



Experimenting with a corporate practice of a dynamic approach to reading scripture, *lectio divina*, has borne especial fruit. With a group that tells itself it knows little of the Bible, I present a passage (such as Exodus 14:14, Mark 6:50, John 6:20 or John 15:9-11 and 15) printed out in a larger than usual font. People in turn read a verse, hold some silence, then in two's or three's choose a word or phrase that resonates with them, and then those who can to tell everyone why they chose the words they did. People have surprised themselves in what they have been moved to speak out. I have found that the same process works well with songs such as Bernadette Farrell's interpretation of psalm 139, "O God, you search me and you know, me". The line, "with love everlasting you besiege me" so clearly elicits God's blessing. At such a gathering I would offer simple teaching and chance for reflection on blessing in everyday life, blessing in scripture, spirituality, theology and liturgy. This would lead into conversations in which I would ask small groups to be as present to one another as they can, within a positive commitment to confidentiality with regard to anything people disclose about themselves.

### Questions for Conversation

In recent months I have developed a range of group conversation starters. Laity with no great confidence in their "knowledge" can easily engage with this because no one can deny the validity of their experience or viewpoint.

- What is working well?
- What gives cause for dissatisfaction?
- Where is God in your experience of Church now?
- What is your personal commitment/hope?
- Who are you working with?
- What does the word "blessing" mean in Scripture and the Christian life?
- What do you understand as a "blessing" in your experience?
- Who do you know who lives in "blessing"?
- Do you have a sense now of being "blessed"?
- Who "blesses" you?
- Whom do you "bless"?
- How does "blessing" connect with God as "Trinity", "praise" and "joy" and "worship"?
- What are you learning about God's "blessing"?
- How are you deliberately living in God's "blessing"?
- How is blessing reciprocal?
- How can "blessing" be a diminishment rather than a liberation?
- How are you/your church ignoring God's "blessing"?
- What can the church learn from those on the "edge" or who worship occasionally?

## Issues arising in conversation

Here is a selection of comments and questions that have arisen in conversation, some of them expressed with real pain.

- Attracting more laity to participate in this project may be a slow process
- How can its value be accepted by the laity and not “done to us” by clergy?
- How can more laity come to recognize themselves as the Church, not just as supporters of what the clergy are doing?
- Other churches seem to have more “aliveness” but I don’t want to leave “my” church
- It’s hard persuading young ones to attend worship
- Why can’t we have a wide variety of musical style?
- Our priest is so busy we don’t like to bother her
- Our priest is so busy there isn’t time for learning or development. ....unless someone else were to make that happen
- We miss the religious community who looked after so many people
- Anger is wrongly directed at the clergy – it’s the system that’s at fault
- We want to go deeper into faith and to have experiences of healing
- None of us has enough time
- We have a long memory of not being nurtured
- The education we had as teenagers has run out and we have no alternative offered.

## Aspirations: Discerning God’s Purposes

In my experience these conversations can include time for focussing on a pressing question that may be a priority at the moment. For example, “How to witness to God’s hospitality by connecting with a different strand of people in the neighbourhood? How to be bolder in managing all-age worship or in planning to admit young ones to receiving Holy Communion? What extra resource would they need for that and where would they find it?”

In the published resource book I shall weave an open space through the conversations for addressing whatever problem they currently need to resolve. I shall be keen to notice what difference it makes to explore an issue in a conversation rather than in a church council discussion. One question I often ask is “to follow Christ here and now, what have you not got that we need?” Some of the answers I’ve received are the following:

- That “ordinary” members would increasingly grow in responsibility for sharing in God’s mission here
- That more opportunities are offered in the daytime
- That we increase the number of lay leaders
- That we find ways to increase learning through small groups

- That we seek alternative patterns of learning for different personalities and experience
- That we increasingly see ourselves as a “learning church” – at every stage in life
- That we communicate our programme more effectively
- That more people feel responsible for welcoming and integrating others
- That we talk to our friends but include others too
- That we get a great picture of where members of the congregation live
- That we give attention to making contact with young working/unemployed adults
- That we redevelop our children’s ministry
- That we communicate who we are more purposefully.

Group conversations include time for sharing refreshments and chatting. To emphasize how much is lost when an understanding of blessing is limited to being a liturgical prerogative of the clergy, I have developed a mutual exchange of blessings. I relieve initial anxiety by explaining that the physical activity is like sharing the peace. In an exchange of blessings I ask everyone to memorize a phrase such as “May the Lord bless you richly”. After demonstrating the exchange with another person, I invite people to move around, simply signing others and being themselves signed on the forehead, with the mark of the cross. Joyful, respectful and yet stretching group experiences such as this build Wisdom Community.

## **5. DISPERSED: The Crucified God of Blessing**

### **Wisdom Communities in Mission**

When we know we live in God’s blessing we subvert the dominant economy. Signs of this are to be found where laity, in churches and schools, in small and invisible ways, are using their influence to create “spaces” for an alternative story, challenging the self-evidence of the narrative of secular modernity. Some churches quietly nurture participants who are bulwarks of neighbourhood networks or who contribute to civic life. There is much to celebrate about ventures into evangelism, food banks, and serving neighbourhoods in times of public distress.

Psalm 139 reminds us that there is no limit to the extent of our discovering ways of engaging with God’s work in the world. “You encompass me behind and before and lay your hand upon me” (Ps 139:5). Our vocation is to be open to fresh revelations of God’s truth and goodness in everyday situations. In conversation about the heart wrenching damage we inflict on one another, laity seek answers to why God seems powerless. They may have their finger on the pulse of precisely why their church cuts so little ice. When we stop the search for “Almighty God”, we may dare to recognize the crucified God amongst the vulnerable. Rather than indulging in self-pity at being rejected, churches could listen to the deep cries of society and the

world. Pope Francis proclaimed recently, “The Communists have stolen our flag. We are the church of the poor”.

The laity have to face day by day the atheistic rejection of a God who is not the true God of Christian worship. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the concentrated way of our being assured that God is open to the distortions and disfigurements of reality. Supporting lay vocations to struggle to hold together God’s abundance with God’s respectful presence in an evil world must be a crucial task of the church now. Many contemporary theologians have made their contributions. Mother Mary Clare, of the Sisters of the Love of God, wrote:

The only way we can know  
the Spirit of God  
is by complete humanity.  
He does not propound theories  
for us to follow. Rather,  
he helps us in the going,  
in the doing, in the self-loss,  
in the throwing of our whole  
selves into following the  
naked Christ, ourselves naked.  
Then things can happen,  
For the Holy Spirit is power  
whereby we may learn to hear truth.  
Mother Mary Clare SLG

I believe there is a deep intuition in society that despite all its flaws, the Church just might know where to dig for the pearl of great price. The media widely reported the Archbishop of Canterbury’s emotional response to the recent war in Gaza, “We must cry to God and beat down the doors of heaven and pray for peace and justice and security”.

### **Nurturing the Laity in their Vocations**

At the close of the Eucharist we cry “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!” Wisdom Communities must evoke and support discipleship and ministry in all wherever they can have influence for the Kingdom. The paramount virtue for those clergy and laity with ministries of oversight is to be intentional about churches having an ethos and practices of spiritual growth, learning and making connections between faith and life.

For clergy with multiple parishes to watch out for this is an almost unbearable responsibility. For public leaders in churches this is a hugely demanding time. Selection, training and ordination

vows hardly touch on this dimension of public ministry. Against the odds, there are leaders who, recognizing this as a time of dissolution for failing systems, are trusting the capacity of dedicated and aware laity to self-organize, reflect on what they are discovering and choose to be part of a process of change. But they need far more support from the wider church than is recognized currently. It takes great courage and motivation, not to conform to old expectations. Such leaders meet resistance from outside as well as self-doubt. Balancing several vocations, including marriage and parenthood, is a witness in itself. Pioneers who light a bonfire to show what is possible when laity are trusted and encouraged need especial encouragement from bishops and their regional colleagues. In the hard work of giving birth to something new, in very difficult circumstances, some of the most resilient and faithful of leaders are feeling disrespected, isolated and brought to the edge of their competence. This does no credit to the institution of the Church.

There are difficult roads too for all the baptized who accept the complexities of belonging and being called. I have in mind those “lay persons” who would say, “I am an ordinary person, a member of my church. I am not a priest or bishop, and have no official role, but through my daily work and perhaps being involved in the church through particular roles and pastoral service, I could be seen as having a leadership role. A vocation in ordinary life can be at least as complicated and demanding as being a traditionally recognized church leader. The Church community is responsible for the formation of laity, as dispersed Church, to take their place in business, politics, law, civil service, non-governmental organizations, and so on, serving God there and so in a sense exercising religious leadership. In other words, religious leadership can be exercised very visibly when focussed explicitly through the official bodies of a religious community; but it can also be exercised in less obvious ways, distributed across the whole of society in every walk of life.

This time of transition is indeed demanding and no one can know how the churches will be in even five years. But it is God who is making the Church. Wisdom Communities will show their fruit in letting go of anxiety for their future. Jesus taught his disciples to focus on the blessing, hallowing and glorifying of God, “*Hallowed be your Name, Your Kingdom Come*” (Matthew 6:9-13). To dare to pray this prayer, in full awareness is to be ready to let old kingdoms die for something new to take their place. The spirit of our conversations that will emerge from this conference is that in joy and freedom, we choose to be more fully present to our sisters and brothers in the radical calling to be the Body of Christ, “as one of another”.

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