

LOCAL COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY at St MAGNUS

In both June and September 2004, I visited Shetland to complete a small-scale research project with St Magnus congregation on the impact of Local Collaborative Ministry (LCM) on them. Data was collected from several sources: the three LCM Workbooks used, semi-structured interviews with fourteen of the congregation; and my own observations both participant and non-participant. The aim was to take a snapshot of the congregation, and identify how LCM impacted on the way members of the congregation connected their faith journey and their daily lives.

Though I had no previous experience of LCM, what I found was impressive. LCM is an approach to a way of being church, holding firmly to the thinking in *New Century*, *New Directions*¹ and *Journey of the Baptized*². It is never a way to be imposed, by either priest or Bishop, as this denies its very essence.

It is, rather, a philosophy which challenges our understanding of ministry and mission. It presumes that baptism implies gifts for everyone, and that we each therefore have a personal ministry. It requires that leadership encourages and empowers everyone, does not seek to control, is willing to take risks and see the interconnectedness of all things.

METHODOLOGY

The triangulation (three sources) of data was:

1. An interview with the Rector, and the three LCM Workbooks:
 - *Listening to the Context*: outlines a project based on a socio-economic survey undertaken to understand local social structures; agree some means of transforming these structures from a Christian perspective; and consider possible action in light of this analysis.
 - *Laying the Foundations*: explores central Christian concepts from the aspects of the *Who, What, Why and Where of Ministry*. It invites reflection on words such as the Trinity, mission, ministry, vocation.
 - *Making the Connections*: asks ‘what is theology?’; combines Bible study with personal experience; considers the importance of telling our stories, and theological reflection.
2. Observation from June and November 2004 visits. This was both ‘participant’ - fully immersed in the group activities, such as the worship occasions and social events - and ‘non-participant’ - apart from the groups in the reflective Saturday morning study sessions.
3. Semi-structured interviews conducted in November 2004. The interview questions emerged both from the observation and from reading the LCM materials. They included general

¹ *New Century, New Directions* Ministry Development Review Group.: General Synod Office of the Scottish Episcopal Church, Edinburgh 2003

² *Journey of the Baptized*. Home Mission Committee: General Synod Office of the Scottish Episcopal Church, Edinburgh, 2003

questions about the interviewee's relationship with the congregation, and questions on topics probed in the LCM material. These included their understanding of words such as 'baptism', 'ministry', 'vocation'. The final section probed their perception of the impact of LCM, and invited any further comments.

The congregation

In spring 2000, St Magnus, Lerwick held their Congregational 'Spiggie' Conference. They perceived four key issues needing development: patterns of worship, use of buildings, sustaining pastoral care, and stewardship. But, largely because their Rector resigned several months later, no strategy for implementing this agenda was formulated.

His resignation triggered a diocesan scrutiny of the congregation's finances. These turned out to be much less healthy than had been presumed. So the new Rector's appointment was on the understanding that stipend could be guaranteed for only five years - congregational finances would have to increase considerably if they wished to retain a full-time Rector.

LCM Gestation

A highly successful stewardship campaign followed quickly, raising the congregation's annual income between 1999/2000 and 2002/2003 by 86%. This also made a huge difference to the congregation's self-confidence, freeing them for more creative thinking.

Under the new Rector, they decided for late 2001 - mid-2002 to use the foundational phase of Mission 21 which aims to help congregations make their church more inviting (MYCMI). On completion of this, they had identified six congregational goals:

1. Continuing support for the 'shared participation' already introduced by the Rector (e.g. lay participation in worship, pastoral care) and its required training.
2. Exploring innovative ways of meeting the needs of 'fringe' members identified during the stewardship campaign (possibly worship in rural areas).
3. Compiling an annual calendar of social events.
4. Establishing a rota, and appropriate training, for stewards & welcomers.
5. Designing a children's corner in church - and a Sunday school if needed.
6. Setting up study or house groups.

By 2004, they had addressed most goals - and taken several further than originally envisioned.

Support for shared participation was among the latter, and critical to the whole approach. While commitment to it was strong, it was also daunting, and, for some, threatening. A small group, the Mission Coordinating Group, formed to stimulate the vestry's thinking, quickly identified that 'shared participation' was wider than had been initially thought, and really involved all the church's approach to mission and ministry. This meant addressing more open-ended questions: not so much 'What tasks need doing; how do we train people for them?' but:

- What is the mission of the church in this place?
- What ministry does this mission require?
- How do we enable as many as possible to participate to the maximum of their potential?

The Process - LCM Birthing

The Rector decided to seek resource for this work as a Local Collaborative Ministry Project, thereby securing financial and personnel support from the church at both provincial and diocesan level. The hope was that this would identify the training and development required to take their mission forward.

Over the next nine months, August 2002 until June 2003, as the first year of LCM, they ran a threefold process, using the LCM Workbook *Listening to the Context*

- Person in Context
- Faith in Context
- Mission in Context

This raised new questions, mainly about the kind of ministry required for the mission they had identified. So priorities changed, and further work was needed.

The second LCM year, named *People on the Move*, ran from August 2003 - June 2004, when the focus was the second of the three original questions *What ministry does that mission require?* They used the two Workbooks *Laying the Foundations* and *Making the Connections*.

It is important to note that simultaneously in 2002/2003, the Sunday morning congregation began to grow. From an average of 30 - 35 people, it regularly became 50 - 60. By the summer of 2004, the total number of communicants was 118; adherents 150 and adding other associated individuals gave a total membership of 310. Particularly notable were the pre-school children using the children's corner, and new, younger choir members.

RESULTS

I first shared in one weekend, June 2004, important in the congregation's life as the 140th celebration of their beginning in June 1864. The congregation was busy and engaged energetically in the week's activities.

I then spent one week in November interviewing fourteen members of the congregation. These interviews attempted to explore the impact of the LCM approach on their thinking and feeling about themselves as members of a Christian congregation. The interview with the Rector was separate and more open-ended.

First Arm of triangulation

(i) Interview with Rector

The Rector was very positive about LCM. He admitted that the whole experience with this congregation was changing his understanding of ministry. For him, the LCM approach was like learning a new language - and he faced new challenges and problems as they arose. He did *not* arrive as the new Rector with a set formula to impose. Questions of leadership emerged early - he realised that it wasn't just that the Rector *couldn't* do everything, but that he *need not* do everything. And further to that, he might not even need to give permission - authority might grow from within individuals in the congregation.

He thought two tools had been critical for the success of this approach: firstly the stewardship campaign which had greatly increased everyone's confidence, and then the Mission 21 (MYCMI) programme. Through this, they identified six goals for the congregation - and adhered to them. It was his idea to develop the 'Mission Coordinating Group'. This not only ensured that responsibilities were shared more widely among the congregation, but also allowed him to keep the people well focused on the identified priorities.

(ii) LCM Workbooks

These Workbooks are intended to meet the diverse needs of congregations with very different abilities. There is a constant thread that all contributions are valuable, and that everyone should listen to each other – invaluable for adults whose experience of study may not be recent, or at worst, quite negative. In the hands of sympathetic tutors, these unique materials are excellent for helping congregations begin discussion of faith issues, in such a way that real connections between the daily round and the gospel are understood and articulated.

Second arm of triangulation - Participant Observation

My intention was to observe the events of one weekend, hopefully hearing the unspoken as well as the spoken. At the Saturday Conference *People on the Move* in June, certain features stood out:

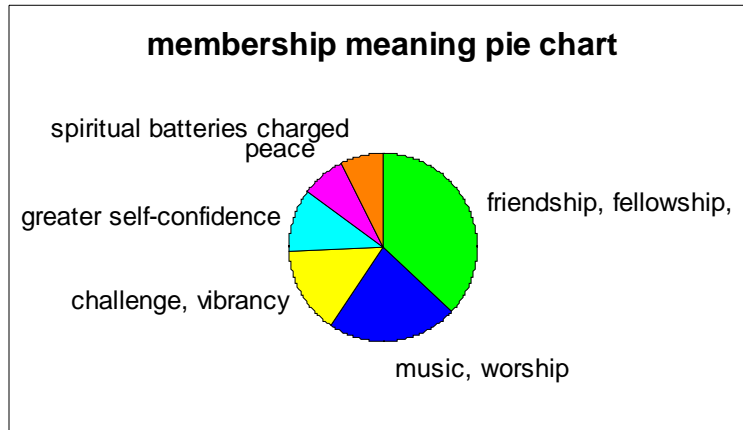
- For the Eucharist, we sat in the round and communicated each other. This was an intentional demonstration of how they perceived themselves as a community of equals. It is all very well for a church leader to *say* all members of a congregation are equals, but usually church space and practical structure deny this, with clergy speaking from an elevated pulpit. Serried ranks of pews gazing into neighbours' necks do not encourage a sense of equality!
- There was a strong emphasis placed on visual symbolism. Historical photographs celebrating their 140 years' history, enlivened the functional hall. A papier-mache image of a Shetland fishing-boat focused thinking about congregational perceptions of the church - cruise liner, where only a few worked, or fishing trawler, all hands on deck? And from the church sanctuary rafters, large life-size sails adorned with ancient Norse symbols, made their historical importance of strikingly visual.
- Their use of story-telling was important - again and again they were asked to share their own experiences; to use that sharing in argument and reflection. The level of trust and ability to listen to one other appeared strong.
- There was congruence between '*what* they did and *how* they did it' and the underlying theology - manifest that morning particularly in communicating the Eucharist in the round, and at the end, still in a circle, in the spontaneous singing in three-part canon.
- There was a confidence around them as individuals and as a congregation that was striking - the confidence to speak their own minds, to disagree with each other, to attempt to engage theologically and question the givens of their faith.

The November visit concentrated on the Interviews, and the further participant observation yielded interesting insights about their perceptions of change, their meaning of collaboration, and their ecumenical involvement.

Third arm of triangulation - Semi-structured Interviews

The fourteen lay members were ten women and four men. Most, though not all, had some specific role within the life of the congregation. Some were on the Vestry; others on the Mission Coordinating Group. The age range was from 35 - 75, but mainly over 50. Eleven had worshipped there for more than seven years; three had been there for less than two years.

1. Perceptions of & by the congregation Figure 1



I believe a significant corporate vision of church emerged - that of a body of people who had a real sense of being family to each other, manifest not only in their feeling 'at home', but also in other attributes which belong to the best functioning families - challenge, enjoyment, the beauty found in their worship home, and the peace in the sanctuary.

2. Response to LCM Workbooks

Interviewees were given a list of phrases to describe the impact of LCM on the congregation as a whole. These were overwhelmingly positive. Even more interesting were the further invited comments:

- i) *Questioning has been good – why we do what we do. Has changed the focus from being a 'Sunday club' to being more of a faith organisation. Lots going on – a bit like the early church? Opening up to young people & parents.*
- ii) *Folk feel to a greater extent that this is their church because of their contribution. Livelier than it used to be.*
- iii) *Many 'salt of the earth' folk don't see themselves as very articulate, & so they aren't comfortable at meetings such as these. Like me, I learn a lot from attending, though I don't say much.*
- iv) *Everyone is pulling together.*

- v) *I always look forward to going to church, refreshment & learning something & sharing in fellowship.*
- vi) *Now we've confidence in ourselves & our abilities, which we didn't before, so we can go out. This has all come from LCM programme - & from the Rector. It's not so much the courses themselves as the opportunity to ask questions of facilitators & other members of the congregation.*
- vii) *We meet outside church, over coffee, one-to-one or in small groups - a kind of 'peer exploration'.*
- viii) *There's more coming from individuals in the congregation, especially in worship. We're no longer only concerned about what the priest says*

3. Significant factors that contributed to this experience

The most important factors they noted were the leadership and the process. See Figure 2.

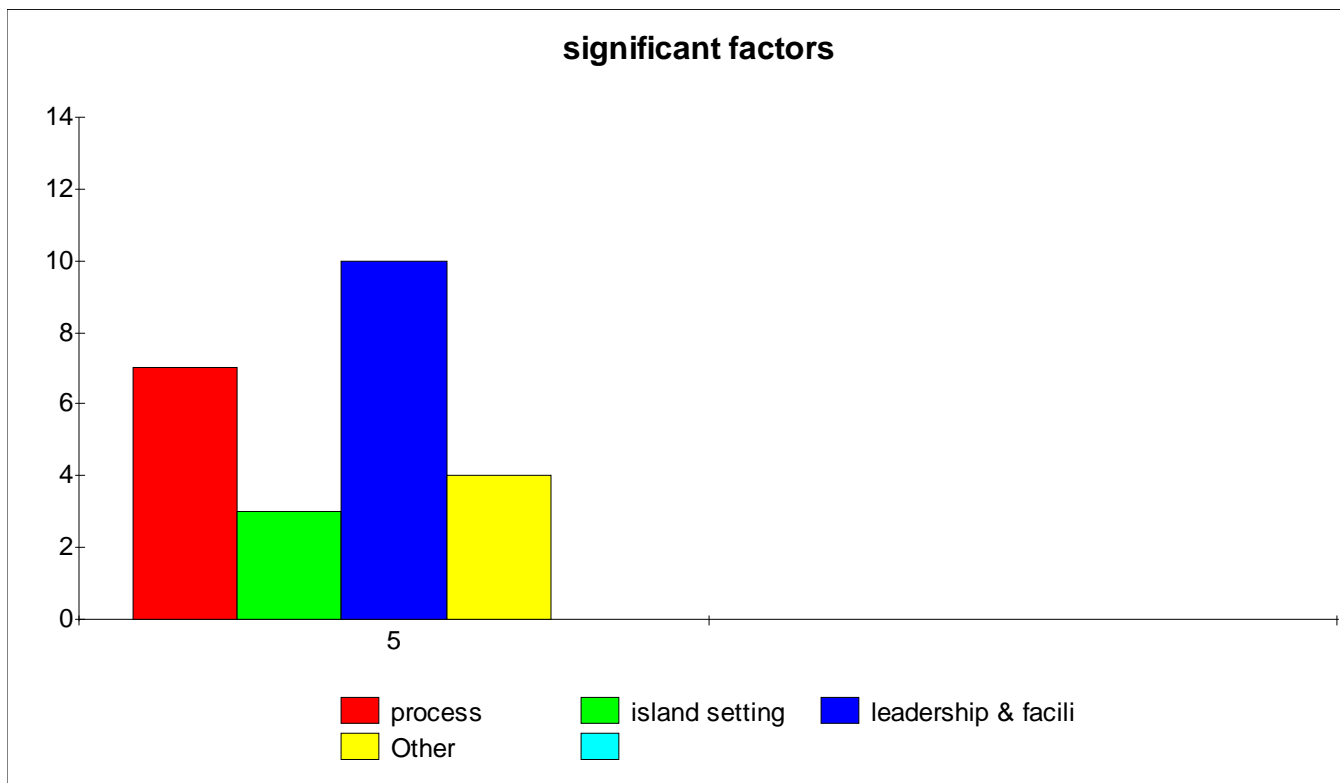


Figure 2

REFLECTIONS ON RESULTS

1. Marks of being an LCM congregation

2. Theological education

1. MARKS OF BEING AN LCM CONGREGATION

a) Openness & trust

All three arms of the data agree about their openness to, and trust of, one another. Both in June and November, I was struck by their preparedness to speak the truth as they each perceived it, whether likely to evoke controversy or not. They appeared willing to listen and try to understand what each other was saying, and to respond with honesty and generosity. It seems to marry comfortably with what the Rector hoped individuals would get from belonging – ‘a greater sense of who they are as individuals, and as relating individuals within a church, working out what this means as a mysterious body’.

b) A Way of being Church

LCM is seen as ‘a way of being church’. This involves the congregation understanding that their mission is what they *all* do, and restructuring the congregation so that they are empowered to carry out this mission in their ministry. Where once this congregation had operated as a community gathered round a minister, they were rapidly moving to being ‘ministering communities’. This was seen in the confidence with which they undertook a variety of responsibilities, volunteering in a manner unprecedented three years earlier. The rotas of various weekly responsibilities - both liturgical and other - evidenced the increasing range of activities and involvement. One member described this as moving from a ‘triangular’ model of church to a ‘circular’ - that is from the traditional model with the Rector at the top apex of the triangle, then the vestry, sides-people, and so on, ‘down’ to the people in the pews along the bottom arm. In the circular model, everyone is encouraged to make their unique contribution, each valued equally. I do not have evidence to cite whether this was the perception of the wider congregational body, but everyone interviewed was aware of considerable restructuring; all to whom I spoke agreed that it had been positive - but that does not allow us to generalise that there were no negative responses.

c) Understanding of Ministry

In June I noted their confidence in claiming *ministry*. That Saturday, various people spoke of their work, both within and outside the congregation as ‘ministry’ - and I understand this was a significant change in their understanding and use of this word. The Workbook *Laying the Foundations* had helped them focus on various aspects of ministry.

They had a wealth of stories about how their understanding of ministry as servanthood was growing: their closer fellowship; more attempts at inclusiveness and caring; several thought ‘Soup Sunday’ (soup and cheese lunch after the service monthly in the church hall - soup volunteered by various members) changed the quality of relationships, making them ‘more like a family’.

d) Relation to the wider community

My June observations noted a congregation that had worked hard to promote themselves and their message to the wider community - especially in their outreach, and their imaginative Exhibition in the church. This eagerness to engage with the world beyond the church walls is important for all churches in the 21st century - our insularity has been partly responsible for today's critical situation. Their ability to mount and sustain a Celebration for one week was remarkable.

e) Attitude to Change

At the November session *Change in the context of wider issues*, the group noted that problems emerge in church when there is resistance to change. They thought a congregation needs to be committed to where God is leading. Acts 15 was quoted as a model for people considering their 21st century faith in terms of scripture. One woman thought that St Magnus had been digging for gifts in the community for the previous two years – just as Archbishop Rowan, at the SEC Provincial Conference, had said Jesus told his disciples to do!

2. THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

This LCM process was undeniably faithful to the SEC approach to remodelling church as described in *New Century New Directions*, and then in *Journey of the Baptised*. Contemporary theological educators, such as Dan Hardy³, Thomas Groome⁴ and Jeff Astley⁵ write of the urgency of recovering theological education for every Christian; that a theologically literate church is vital for the church's future. This belief underpins all the educational material in LCM; St Magnus' response to the materials confirms the yearning for such teaching.

The Workbooks underline that education in a Christian context stems from knowing God through lived experience, using present action, and critical reflection. The Workbooks were all liberally peppered with quotations from literature to make faith questions vivid.

Baptism theme

The Lima text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, states:

By baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ. . thus those baptised are no longer slaves to sin, but free. . administered in obedience to our Lord, baptism is a sign and seal of our common discipleship.

The Workbook *Laying the Foundations* explores the nature of baptism in the context of answering the question 'who does ministry?' It argues that all who have been baptised are the

³ Hardy, Daniel. *Fundamental Issues in Theological Education*. Canterbury, England: Anglican Consultative Communion, 2002. and see Bibliography

⁴ Groome, Thomas H. *Christian Religious Education - Sharing our Story and Vision*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, USA: Jossey-Bass, 1980

⁵ Astley, Jeff. *Ordinary Theology*. 1st ed. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2002

laos, the people of God, and through baptism, are called to live as God's fellow-workers. *the ministry of the baptised, the community of the baptised, the high calling of the baptised.*⁶

Everything is open to anyone who wishes to participate - whether for one session, or for all. The Workbooks invite exploration and discovery so that people think for themselves, guided by particular reflections and readings. Each Workbook is set in a context of mission or ministry - whether by social analysis, or imaginative reflection. Again and again participants are invited to consider what is happening in and around them - to find God in their midst.

LEARNING FOR OTHER CONGREGATIONS

It is important to recognise that this approach is not a panacea - it cannot be exactly replicated in any other situation. Every congregation's context is unique - just as we each are unique in the eyes of God.

a) The importance of baptism in this philosophy

This was critical for growth.

They realized that they were all called, because they were children of God, naked, in baptism – not because of who they were or what they had achieved, or how much they had prayed. Perceiving baptism as the critical fact in our membership of Christ's body, rather than ordination or confirmation, affirms, among other things, that theological education may be based on a congregation, rather than an individual. It is about enhancing the learning of all. The curriculum is both content and process, and needs to engage head, heart and imagination, aiming to make connections, making links between faith and life permeable.

b) Local & global interaction

The recognition of the importance of the interaction between the local context within the global context - the one needs the other.

I explored 'context' in the interviews rather narrowly, more as geography - the island setting. On reflection, I believe that the setting was important - because they recognised that they had to work within this local context, with all the limitations and opportunities it placed upon them. They foresaw very early that, being hundreds of miles by sea or air from the rest of the diocese and national church, they could not expect trainers to visit weekly - as was the norm. This led, as the Rector described, to 'filleting' material, so that it could be offered in chunks manageable for trainers travelling to be with them. They also had the vision to see their context at a national level, and asked to be identified as an LCM congregation, knowing the church at diocesan and provincial levels would give resources for this. This kind of thinking also led them to invite experts in certain fields (e.g. Liturgy) to lead workshops. This benefited the wider church as well as the congregation. Every congregation needs to be as aware as possible of its contexts – local, diocesan, provincial and global.

c) Importance of focus

It is essential to keep the congregation focused on what they identify as important. Critical to this is asking questions in the best order e.g. In this place, what is mission; what ministry does this require; how do we maximise participation; what do we learn from review activity?

⁶ Thompsett Frederica Harris *Baptismal Living: Steadfast Covenant of Hope* in Anglican Theological Review

This congregation found it helpful to organise everything within the liturgical year, and this also helped them not to be distracted by immediate crises. But it stemmed mainly from asking questions in an appropriate order, so that one step flowed logically from the previous. The congruence in the whole process, between *what* they did and *how* they did it, sustained by its adherence to the thinking in *Journey of the Baptised*, was significant. Everything used and done under the LCM umbrella was working towards the same underlying principles. The Workbooks helped especially here, asking them to examine their context, from which the mission priorities emerged; challenging them to think about some central Christian concepts and reflect theologically. They also modelled what they tried to be – manifest in their ongoing review and evaluation.

d) Self-confidence

Trust and self-confidence are vital for both congregation and leader.

People's willingness to engage stemmed from the congregational self-confidence which grew dramatically following the successful stewardship campaign. It was not just about individual confidence - their confidence as a congregation grew, so that they began to see ministry was not just about what the Rector did, nor even just what they individually did. Rather they began to see that not only has the church a ministry to the world, but the world ministers to the church. It was about what everyone did.

e) Pace of change

Change takes time - get the pace right - ask 'what is it fair to do at this time?'

However enthusiastic some people will be, change will always meet resistance; new ways of working will lead to problems in communication and conflicting styles. As commitment increases, people can easily take on too much, which in the end does no-one any good. A balance is needed. This congregation was almost in danger of trying too much too quickly. We all do well to recall that God's time-scale is infinitely longer than ours, and is never to be seduced by a demand for 'Now!'

CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCH

LEADERSHIP

Church leadership today faces multiple challenges. Traditionally it has been about hierarchy and control, and has assumed that one size fits all. But new models are needed to re-energise our churches for the new millennium. Theological educators are beginning to address this.

Eddie Gibbs argues that leadership is profoundly influenced by context, and that context may throw up improbable leaders - Jesus chose "twelve unlikely individuals" as his first disciples.⁷ Gibbs believes that we urgently need to understand leadership as something that applies to everyone who claims to be a disciple of Christ – on the basis that we should all be exercising some influence on others.⁸ Seeing leadership as a team function, involving the whole

⁷ Gibbs, Eddie *Leadership Next* p 25

⁸ *ibid* p 21

congregation, has good foundations in the New Testament understanding of *koinonia*. Team-building empowers more people, and should enable congregations to move from ministering largely among themselves to ministering in the world.

In his chapter in *Local Ministry*, Phil Kirk⁹ takes this idea of leadership involving everyone further. He argues that leadership needs to be essentially regenerative – enabling congregations to discover what God is doing in that place, and then join in. The question is how is this best achieved?

Kirk believes that our ‘deep-wired’ model of leadership is that of the heroic leader, but he believes this goes beyond realistic expectations. Think of popular cultural media heroes– most have extraordinary ability to take care of those less able. So these narratives create archetypal heroes, who protect their communities. But when we reflect how leaders are expected to turn around the ailing fortunes of companies or sports teams, we see just how illusory & mythical this is. Kirk argues that this is a social construction, which leads many to leave leadership to the few.

He asks ‘could resistance to the idea of leadership as a wider communal responsibility (the priesthood of all believers) be as much to do with dependency as with theology or ecclesiology?’¹⁰ If leadership can be seen as the goal of the whole community, then it becomes everyone’s work, and leadership capacity is nurtured and sustained. Kirk argues that for such forms of leadership to develop, everyone needs to take up roles – not in a static, never-changing way, but so that everyone knows what is expected of themselves and each other. He argues that this is all-important.

The St Magnus’ evidence suggests that the leadership given by their Rector, and the other facilitators, was critical to the LCM success. The Rector attempted to empower all in the congregation who so wished, to recognize and use their own gifts. One of his skills was in identifying and allotting the appropriate roles for everyone in the congregation’s developing ministry.

AUTHORITY

My biggest concern was around the understanding of authority in this LCM context. I believe it is an area of considerable ambiguity, and therefore likely contention for LCM congregations. There is no reference to ‘authority’ in *Journey of the Baptised*, and no discussion of it in *New Century New Directions*.

It is possible to identify different kinds of authority exercised by a Rector or priest-in-charge of an SEC congregation. Firstly, there is the canonical authority of the Rector conferred on him by the diocesan Bishop; no-one can interfere with this without the Bishop’s permission. The congregation will respect this canonical authority. There is also an authority which comes from the personal authority which s/he will carry because of their relationships in exercising his/her own constellation of gifts. Interestingly, the only person who used the word during my research was the Rector himself. He said *things could grow from people’s integral authority. Authority*

⁹ Greenwood, R, and Caroline P eds. *Local Ministry* chap 11 *Leadership* Kirk, Phil London, England: SPCK, 2006

¹⁰ *ibid* p 123

was important in more ways than one. . . The initial authority gets things going, but momentum creates authority. Permission to exercise authority doesn't exist in a vacuum.

He used the word loosely, making a distinction between the people's authority and his own canonical authority, conferred on him when he arrived, but recognizing that these two are closely connected. While the canonical authority is indisputable, it will be vital for him/her to learn how to share some of the personal authority with others. Is it better defined as taking responsibility (*New Century, New Directions*) or 'permission-giving'? Maybe realization is more important than definition. This congregation had once perceived most of the responsibilities, and the permission-giving as lying only with the Rector; at this point, they had an embryonic sense of it moving out to themselves.

So how is authority defined in LCM contexts? While in this snapshot it was not controversial, it certainly could be. Who makes decisions, and with what accountability when there is no ordained leadership, or when several congregations are sharing resources in this way?

Authority in this context needs further study. Clergy may be too quickly defensive, thinking that such an approach to being church in some way undermines their priestly authority. Not so – we need those who are called to priestly ordination, just we need the many who are called to be members of Christ's body, but not to ordination. It is about negotiating clergy / laity relationships to reconcile a new balance between the two.

CONCLUSION

I have to applaud what I witnessed – many in this congregation were finding a deeper, more meaningful expression of their faith through this approach to being church.

But LCM is not a straitjacket; it is not a series of hoops that congregations have to jump through. Its essence is that congregations choose the LCM journey, which is not a straight road through life, but rather a path into a way of being church. It may have good fairways and fine greens, but unexpected sandpits, unseen bunkers and other hazards in the rough will demand careful discernment of best action. I emphasize this, as I think that those who have not experienced it are unlikely to appreciate just how much commitment it lays on congregations themselves. But in the demand lies the prize, for LCM may be a means to closer discipleship. How, and why, that may be the case, however, needs research of other congregations using the LCM approach.

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