

Local Collaborative Ministry in the Scottish Episcopal Church

INTRODUCTION

Although it has been around for over a decade and found a settled place in the structures of the Episcopal Church, it is obvious that many people still struggle to understand what Local Collaborative Ministry really involves. Three provincial roadshows raised many important questions and highlighted a number of common misunderstandings. They also brought to our attention the needs of those people who have come into the Province in these last years who were not part of the initial educational process at provincial and diocesan level.

This article does not go into the history of LCM that is documented elsewhere. What it tries to do is to address negatively some incomplete understandings of LCM and then positively to present a working definition agreed in 1997 by the Ministry Advisory Group. This definition of LCM has never been a “law of the Medes and Persians”, enshrined in Canon Law but has been useful as a peg on which to hang some of the fundamental principles that undergird the SEC’s particular way of doing local ministry. In due time, given more experience, there may be a case for revisiting this definition but at the moment it provides a starting point.

LCM IS MORE THAN EXTRA ROTAS

Firstly, LCM is not fundamentally about “getting people to do more things in church”. This is often the comment passed after an initial (often superficial) examination of LCM, based on a misunderstanding of the way that the concept of “ministry” is used in LCM. Alternatively, people say this when they visit LCM church and see the obvious effects LCM has had on what might have been described as an “ordinary” or traditionally-structured congregation.

It is usual that LCM results in increased confidence on the part of many churchgoers that may show itself in more people being engaged in leading worship, reading, offering intercessions or undertaking other congregationally-based activities either in the public eye or behind the scenes. But there are many other movements in church life that can have exactly the same consequences (e.g. a charismatic renewal, revived teaching about spiritual gifts, Cursillo, local training courses etc). Hence the criticism of LCM that “we have been doing this for ages”.

Moreover, although in itself such increased involvement can be beneficial both to a congregation and an individual Christian, it can also be dangerous if all spiritual and physical energy is being turned inwards. A local church may have the finest lay participation possible – with lengthy rotas of committed people serving week by week, with deep and warm fellowship fostered by mutual sharing of life and work and with the ordained focussing on their particular ministries – but it may be at the expense of doing real mission. Nobody has any time or strength left to be the church in the world. Such a congregation is like the cruise liner that has every possible latest engineering technical innovation, the best trained crew and the last word in extravagant facilities but which will never leave the quayside as it is too preoccupied showing off how luxurious it is.

If LCM is to offer anything, it has to offer a more fundamental change than sharing out church-centred jobs to a wider group of people.

LCM IS NOT GETTING CLERGY ON THE CHEAP

Secondly, LCM is also not fundamentally about “getting more people ordained”, and especially about “third-class ordination” (where stipendiary ministry is regarded as the normative and best, and non-stipendiary a derivative and second-class version). Such a criticism often comes from clergy whose

underlying concerns appear to be about professional status, career protectionism and the maintenance of “clerical standards”.

LCM along with any form of ministry development will have something to say about ordination, both its theology and practise. Inasmuch as historically it has tended to move from the geographical marginal areas of the church to the centre, being essentially a grass-roots movement, the reality is that issues of ordination come speedily to the surface in many places. Bishops faced with a number of small congregation seeking to sustain sacramental worship (the oft-quoted question of Bishop Tom Ray in Northern Michigan 30 years ago “How can we lay the table in the wilderness?”) have turned to LCM as one way forward.

But those involved in LCM in the SEC at congregational level know that ordination in an LCM context is anything but easy or cheap, either in terms of formation/training or the work undertaken by those ordained through an LCM process. Consequently, the numbers of those being called by and from LCM congregations for ordained ministry are comparatively small. Out of over 50 congregations in the SEC exploring or implementing LCM, there are only a handful of identified ordinands.

LCM IS NOT THE LAST CHANCE SALOON

Thirdly, LCM is not fundamentally about “keeping churches going”. There may be very good reasons why any particular church should be kept going when numerically it is really unsustainable – it may have historical significance, occupy a significant place and be an important presence in a local community or be in a location undergoing regeneration. There will be a number of ways in which such a church can be kept going e.g. being yoked with a larger congregation. There will also be occasions when particular churches should be allowed to close. LCM can have something to offer to churches in both sets of circumstances but it cannot be undertaken as a last resort measure when all else has failed nor is the primary objective of LCM the continuation of a congregation for its own sake.

In its ten year Scottish history, LCM has been used mainly in small churches, often rural and remote, where there have been fewer alternative options available. But experience has shown that there are some congregations where numbers are just too small or the age structure too elderly for LCM to be contemplated. Similarly there are now an increasing number of healthy and secure congregations that have begun LCM from a position of comparative strength, often alongside and with the support of stipendiary ministry.

These three points demonstrate how easy it is to misunderstand what LCM is. People have jumped to their usually critical conclusions often through a faulty interpretation of the experiential evidence or by overgeneralization. Certainly LCM touches on and is concerned about congregational involvement, ordination and the maintenance of congregational life, but none of these in themselves adequately or exhaustively go to the heart of this movement. In the same way when we are moved by hearing a memorable piece of classical music in a concert hall, we might say that it is the result of the giftedness of the instrumentalists, the skill of the conductor, the genius of the composer, the wonderful acoustics of the building or our own sensitivity on that occasion. Of course each of those factors is important but none is sufficient to define the “how” of that particular performance. The music itself is bigger and better than any one factor.

A WORKING DEFINITION

So is it possible to offer a definition of LCM?

One suggested to the College of Bishops in 1997 by the then TISEC Ministry Advisory Group was:

“The development of self-sustaining congregational life built on the ministry of all the baptised”.

This definition contains a number of key features that indicate something of the true nature of LCM.

THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE

Firstly, the ministry of all the baptised is established as the fundamental foundation of LCM. Although there has been debate about the use of this phrase in the SEC, it is widely used in the Anglican Communion to acknowledge the both the importance and the significance of baptism: that all Christians are baptised into Christ and so to share in Christ's ministry in and to the world. As the 1984 Ordinal repeats in each Ordination service:

In baptism every disciple is called to make Jesus known as Saviour and Lord and to share his work in renewing the world.

And the opening Collect prays:

Hear our prayer which we offer for all members of your holy Church; that in their vocation and ministry they may serve you in holiness and truth...

If the idea of baptismal ministry lies at the heart of LCM, there are two natural consequences. It means LCM as a concept must be rooted in mission and is not just about keeping the ecclesiastical "show on the road" for its own sake or (more often) for the sake of the members of the congregation. In fact one of the first and fundamental questions that a congregation is asked to address in any movement towards LCM – often using the insights and experiences of Mission 21 – is "How are you called to be the church in this local context?". One of the steps towards being accepted as a formal LCM congregation on the "continuum" agreed by the College of Bishops (Exploration – enquiry – covenant) is the production of a Mission plan acceptable to the diocesan Mission Committee/Task Force.

Furthermore, this corporate vocational challenge is matched by a similar individual one i.e. "How are you called to live out your baptism in your individual life context – at home, work, recreation etc?". LCM always talks about ministry in this 24/7 sense, understanding what happens in the church building for the hour on a Sunday as being of the nature of "ministry support". There a small number gifted and called in particular ministries (e.g. teaching, worship-leading, sacramental) offer resources to the far greater number whose focus of ministry is outside the church door.

This is well expressed in the image used in the LCM Workbook on Ministry:

*The church is a service station. Now a car will run for a while without having to be serviced, but not for long. It has to have its energy (fuel) supply replenished. It has to have broken parts repaired. It has to be renewed – new tyres, oil and water. Otherwise it will soon be unable to fulfil its purpose. But no-one in his right mind buys a car in order to take it to the service station. No normal person wants to keep his car around the service station all the time. Service stations are a means to an end. They provide what we need to continue our journey, to get back into the world, and to keep moving toward our destination. It is very important that some people be willing to train themselves for work at the service station, and offer themselves in that vocation. They are absolutely necessary. But just think what would happen if everybody got the idea that the only true vocation was to work at a service station! So it is with the church. There are absolutely vital and indispensable ministries that go on within its walls; sacramental, educational and social. But it is a terrible mistake to think that these make up the real ministry of the church. From *The Calling of the Laity* Verna Dozier Alban (1988), 84-5*

LCM works hard to emphasize this focus on the ministry of all the baptised. It repeatedly draws people back to the renewal of baptismal promises, both liturgically and educationally and many of the LCM congregations have found great joy in their experience of using the new SEC Baptismal liturgies in this way. A number of other resources are provided to enable individuals, groups and congregations to reflect on and pray through faith in daily life.

THE GIFTED CONGREGATION

Secondly, the definition employs carefully the adjective “self-sustaining” to describe the nature of the congregational life that it seeks to establish. The positive aspect of this draws on the principle expounded by Roland Allen in his pioneer missionary work in China that God always gives to the local church all the gifts necessary to undertake its (God’s) work and to respond to its discerned vocation. A practical illustration of this is to suggest that if God is calling a church to engage in youth work, it would be expected that some of its members to have the giftedness to relate to young people. In the same way in the area of “ministry support”, a congregation should be able to identify, name and call those gifted within its membership to sustain its worshipping, fellowship and sacramental life. The alternative - as Allen saw it - is to produce weak Christian communities, living in a immature dependency mode reliant always on external providers, especially of the sacraments, and so lacking in confidence.

The working together of all the baptised and gifted individuals is part of the “collaboration” implicit in the title LCM. Every member is challenged to offer their gifts to God’s mission on the understanding that the church’s work is impoverished when even one person holds back. Such collaboration is not easy to achieve in practise and LCM congregations often experience considerable tension and conflict. But in learning to handle this – sometimes through the process of consensus – the synergy of true collaboration can be released.

In LCM there is a process of discernment of gifts and calling, founded on trust and prayer. There is also a recognition that all gifts need to be shaped, formed and applied so lifelong education, formation and training is available to every baptised person to equip them for their particular ministry. No theoretical distinctions are made between, say, the one whose ministry is in a Civil Service office working on a computer and the other whose ministry is at the altar as a sacramental priest. Both have the theological foundation of their giftedness and both will need the ability to reflect theologically as they exercise their ministry and work out the implications of their baptismal calling. It may be that they will need some different practical skill training to be able to minister effectively but this is a secondary issue.

There also a negative dimension in the definition of a congregation being “self-sustaining” as it attempts to deny that it is an independent or autonomous unit. As with persons, maturity for a congregation involves a network of right relationships with others and LCM develops this at local, diocesan and provincial levels.

At the local level, an LCM congregation grows out the mentality of always being “the poor relation”, dependent on other usually larger congregations and can take its place as an equal neighbour, viable and healthy. On the journey to becoming self-sustaining, relationships alter dramatically from being those of competition and threat to those of support and encouragement. This is seen most clearly in terms of the diocese where personal episcopal oversight is enjoyed rather than being perceived as control. LCM congregations value their Bishops because they know they really need them – not just to do the special liturgical rites – but as part and parcel of their collaborative life, as friends, guides and mentors. In practise this oversight is often shared by the Diocesan Mission and Ministry Officer (or equivalent) and/or the LCM Mentor. These will offer support and encouragement as well as criticism and challenge, and point congregations to where additional educational resources can be found for their faith development.

Provincially, the LCM Officer will be involved in a congregation’s growth into LCM, and should the calling of sacramental ministries be part of that experience, the Provincial Director of Ordinands and a

Provincial Panel will be asked to work with them. Often a small congregation will begin to discover what the Province really can offer and what they can give to it as they develop LCM.

GROWING UP

Thirdly, it is important to note that “development” is the description used to define LCM. LCM is about a process of change through which congregations are enabled and supported to grow into maturity, but it is never a fixed state that is achieved or arrived at. LCM is not a programme or a course to be undertaken with an evaluation or examination at the end to mark completion – in that respect it differs from Mission 21 “Make Your Church More Inviting”.

It also often operates on a slow timescale, the pace of which has to be determined by the congregation itself. Proper foundations have to be laid during the years of exploring and enquiring on the LCM continuum, so that the congregation own the process for themselves. Where they have entered the covenanted stage, annual reviews with the Bishop, LCM Officer and/or the Diocesan Mission and Ministry Adviser are built in to the programme, for the members to assess progress and set themselves new plans and goals. But the process of education, discernment and calling is always on-going as it is integral to and essential for the work of mission.

Because LCM is about a local congregation (or a locale), it will be rooted in the history, geography and culture of that particular place and will reflect it. But these parameters will change over time, sometimes rapidly (e.g. the effects of a change in support to the agricultural industry, a rise in fuel prices, the opening of a Sunday ferry, a new housing estate), sometimes very slowly (e.g. the effects of an aging elderly population, decline in fish stocks). The life of an LCM congregation must have the flexibility to respond to all these changes as and when they occur if it is to be truly local. It is out of this awareness of the local context that it can offer a genuine, relevant and practical prophetic ministry to its community.

CONCLUSION

LCM is not a reshaping of the traditional church structures, finding new ways and/or new people to keep the church going. It is – to adopt the current jargon – a “new expression of being church”, and a “mission-shaped church”, but built on the long-cherished Scottish Episcopal traditions of sound Biblical scholarship, sacramental spirituality and living liturgy. It honours our history in Scotland and recognises our share in God’s mission throughout this country – “wherever two or three are gathered together”

Tim Morris
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