

## **Monarch, Shepherd or Parent? Interim Ministry and the Church of England**

Elizabeth Ann Jordan<sup>1</sup>

Rawreth Rectory, Church Road  
Rawreth, nr Wickford  
Essex, SS11 8SH  
UK  
ejordan@chelmsford.anglican.org

### ABSTRACT

Interim Ministers, who nurture the health of congregations during a ministerial vacancy, have a privileged perspective on congregational life and the practice and theology of full-time ordained leadership. In this article the character of pastoral charge in the Church of England is examined and three theological models identified and contrasted. The author's own experience of interim ministry is compared with the available literature and conversation with other practitioners in this country and in North America. These Interim Ministers claim that the relational nature of such leadership is congruent in each denomination, such that this examination of the practice and theology of the Church of England sheds light on the nature of all ministerial leadership.

Keywords: Church of England; church leadership; espoused theology; interim ministry; operant theology.

### *Introduction*

Intentional Interim Ministers are appointed for the period between more permanent ministries, to guide a church through the transitional process. There is no shortage of work on the theology of ordained ministry and the practice of pastoral care, but my own experience of interim ministry has presented an opportunity to reflect on this subject from the congregations' perspective and to observe the message given by those in positions of leadership. I found that implicit assumptions existing at

1. Elizabeth Jordan has been ordained for twenty-four years in the Church of England. After the period described as an Interim Minister, she now works in Chelmsford Diocese as Lay Training and Education Adviser.

both local and diocesan level about the theology and practice of incumbency in the Church of England were made apparent.<sup>2</sup> This article examines these disparate models of ministerial leadership, demonstrating the perspective that may be gained by those in short-term appointments or placements, not only on the place they are situated, but also on the institution that carries out mainstream practice.

### Methodology

Interim ministry, being on the edge of parish, chapter and diocese, is a privileged place. As an Interim Minister (IM) I was both an “insider” and an “outsider”; a participant observer immersed in and identifying with two churches, while retaining the distance that came from the shared knowledge that I was not there for the long term.

Throughout this period I kept a journal, recording my activity, meetings and conversations, with the object of noting my own reactions to the role of the IM and comparing this experience with the literature and practice of other churches. I surveyed the existing literature found in books and ministerial websites, and emailed and spoke with nine other ministers engaged in interim ministry in England and Scotland. The work they did ranged from the maintenance of regular worship and pastoral care to intentional pieces of developmental work as part of their full-time role. Of these, three were Anglicans: one was a retired priest offering wise guidance to less experienced colleagues, one was acting as an IM in a parish alongside his responsibilities as vicar of a large parish and another held a diocesan post that focused on work in churches during vacancies. IM is recognized as a distinctive category of ministry in the churches of North America, in the Church of Scotland and in the English United Reformed Church. The literature arising from these churches suggests little variation in practice, regardless of differences in churchmanship and theology of ministry.<sup>3</sup> The variety of experience I encountered also suggested that variations in practice were not the result of denominational differences, but of diocesan policy.

2. There is no one term to describe those with ministerial leadership and even within the Church of England this could be the incumbent, the team vicar, a priest in charge or resident minister. Literature from North America uses the term, “settled pastor,” while I have referred to “ordained leadership,” as well as to the more familiar terms of a vicar or an incumbency to describe this post. The discussion concerns those whose departure creates the “vacancy;” this article is not about the nature of priesthood, but rather about a “pastoral charge,” the “cure of souls.”

3. Fuller descriptions of the work of IMs may be found in the literature cited and especially Roger S. Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1998).

Within the broad field of practical theology two approaches have proved stimulating. One is “ordinary theology”; the uninstructed theology of congregations.<sup>4</sup> I wanted to gain an insight into the belief structures of the congregation, and so listened to their own view of ministry and priesthood through what has been said to me about my role, the practice of my predecessors and the expectations of my successor. While aware that I was being told only a small part of their story their words are indicative of the perspective they wished to present. The second approach that has stimulated reflection is “implicit theology”; an understanding of the “basic-but-nascent” theological habits; language, culture, and liturgical practice, that make up the life of churches, congregations and denominations.<sup>5</sup>

Both these approaches may be included in the category of operant theology, embedded within the actual practices of a group, distinguished from *normative theology*; the scriptures, creeds, official church teaching and the liturgies, *formal theology*; the work of theologians and dialogue with other disciplines, and *espoused theology*; embedded within a group’s articulation of its beliefs.<sup>6</sup> This analysis relates the conversation and practice of both congregation and leadership to other, more commonly recognized forms of theology and suggests how each interacts with the other. This article will examine the insights gained from interim ministry about the practice of incumbency and, in the light of them, explore three theological models. In the terms described above, the operant theology and espoused theology of incumbency will be examined.

### *Interim Ministry and the Operant Theology of Incumbency*

#### *The Incumbent and Congregation Relationship*

We begin our analysis by asking what the experience of interim ministry reveals of the operant theology of incumbency. There is considerable agreement amongst IMs of all denominations that it is the effect of the ending of the relationship between the vicar and the congregation that creates the need for interim ministry.<sup>7</sup> Parochial ministry is seen as

4. Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 56.

5. Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. 2.

6. Helen Cameron, et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action, Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), p. 54.

7. From the National Association of Lutheran Interim Pastors’ website: [www.nalip.net/education.asp](http://www.nalip.net/education.asp) (accessed 4 February 2011), also The Lutheran Church of the Missouri Synod, <http://interimministrylcms.org/> accessed 20 December 2010 and that

a unique emotional system, and “there is no bond quite like the bond which develops between people and pastor.”<sup>8</sup>

Priestly authority is, apparently, a relational leadership, heavily dependent on the skill of the vicar for its maintenance. I was appointed to work in one church whose priest had retired after twelve years and in another where there had been a series of pastoral breakdowns. Though these were two very different situations, in both cases it was apparent that it was the relationship with the vicar(s) that defined the character of the church.

Rather than fearing that all will collapse during the vacancy and that the post should be filled as soon as possible, church leaders are encouraged by IMs to seize the moment when a congregation is open to change.<sup>9</sup> As a ministerial vacancy begins there will often be grief, whether or not the pastor was “successful,” and there may be conflict, low self-esteem and financial challenges.<sup>10</sup> Effective intervention in places where, because of the ending of a lengthy tenure, pastoral re-organization, or death or misconduct, the transition is unlikely to be straightforward will bear much fruit in the future. The United Reformed Church in the UK, for example, routinely appoints an Interim Moderator who fulfils this role in addition to their continuing duties elsewhere, but a trained IM is appointed if there are to be major shifts in emphasis, after a long previous ministry, or a difficult end.<sup>11</sup> Interim ministry slows down the appointment process, allowing the congregation time to make well-informed and deliberate decisions regarding the future course of the church. The congregation is likened to a bereaved person, adjusting after loss and it is deemed in-advisable for the church to act speedily.<sup>12</sup>

The tasks that the Interim Ministry Network identifies each relate to the ending of this significant relationship. The IM must first enable

of the Presbyterian Church of the USA: <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/ministers/interim-pastors> accessed 20 December 2010. Loren B. Mead, *A Change of Pastors...and How it Affects Change in the Congregation* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005), p. viii.

8. Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, p. 95.

9. Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, p. 82.

10. Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, pp. 14–25.

11. Fiona Thomas, Secretary for Education and Learning, URC Church, email message to author, 15 December 2010.

12. Molly Dale Smith, *Transitional Ministry: A Time of Opportunity* (New York: Church Publishing, 2009), p. 4. This is in contrast to Jackson, who believes churches should aim to interview within one month of the previous Vicar leaving. Bob Jackson, *Hope for the Church: Contemporary Strategies for Growth* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), p. 131.

the church to examine its history and come to terms with the past.<sup>13</sup> For example, I encouraged the congregation that mourned the loss of a well-loved priest to recall the processes by which he was welcomed to the parish and so prompt thoughts about how to induct a newcomer. Second, the IM is to claim the *current* identity of the parish; recognizing the gifts and vocation of that particular expression of Christian community. A third task is to encourage new leadership—while valuing the old. My journal records my tentative exploration of the congregations' memories of the past and attempts to affirm those who looked forward as well as expressing nostalgia or anger about the past.

The nature of the relationship between the incumbent and the congregation also affects the dynamics of transition during the vacancy. The experience of the Interim Ministry Network is that denominational structures influence appointments and the relationship between the congregation and the denominational authority, but that emotions, dynamics and the process of leadership are deeply congruent in each church during the period between settled pastors.<sup>14</sup> William Bridges distinguished between change (what happens), transition (the process of dealing with change) and transformation (the new shape which emerges after change).<sup>15</sup> He emphasized the importance of good endings as the beginning of transition.<sup>16</sup> Present practice in the Church of England is to leave the process of departure in the hands of the individual minister to arrange. This is a time when he or she may be least able to discern the best practice because of the emotional ties that are to be broken.<sup>17</sup> If the priest is moving to a more senior or obviously desirable post the congregation may feel gratified that they have been a launch-pad, but in other circumstances, even a retirement, the congregation appears puzzled. Comments to me such as “but we thought you liked it here,” and “what will you do without your friends (here) around you?” suggest that the congregation's “ordinary theology” of incumbency understands the post in terms of affective relationship rather than contractual obligation.<sup>18</sup>

13. Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, p. 30. See also the website of the Interim Ministry Network: [www.imn.org.uk](http://www.imn.org.uk) (accessed 14 December 2010).

14. Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, p. viii.

15. William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (London: Nicholas Brealy Publishing, 1995).

16. Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, p. 23.

17. The Diocese of New York has lengthy guidance about what needs to be done at departure, [cchttp://www.diocesen.org/pages/260-leavetaking-brochure](http://www.diocesen.org/pages/260-leavetaking-brochure) (accessed 12 January 2011). A liturgy could be found in the Franciscan Prayer book *Celebrating Common Prayer* (London: Continuum, 1992).

18. Tony Bradley, *Understanding the Interregnum: Making Judgements when Kings Move* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1996), pp. 8–9 lists reasons for a vacancy with

The “neutral zone,” the space between the ending and the new beginning may be a time of anxiety, but can also be a time of creative experimentation, as ideas are tested out without the need to sustain them in the long term.<sup>19</sup> Though appearing to be a clerical intervention, an IM may be best placed to promote lay ministry by widening participation and identifying fresh voices. This is the primary declared intention of the Vacancy Leadership Advisers appointed in Bristol Diocese “to work alongside those in parishes to identify and develop potential local leaders.”<sup>20</sup>

The fact that the congregations were given no say in my appointment as their IM effectively accomplished a further task identified by the Interim Ministry Network; to remind the local church of its link with the larger church.<sup>21</sup> Diocesan authorities often see the vicar as the link between them and the congregation, while distrust and resentment of diocesan structures is sometimes encouraged by vicars to deflect criticism from their ministry. The vicar may be in the ambiguous position of being treated as a go-between by diocesan authorities while acting as a buffer between the congregation and the diocese.

#### *Congregation not Parish*

The second insight from interim ministry is that it is the congregation that is the unit with which the vicar must work. As well as marked differences in finance and denominational involvement, it is noteworthy that all the North American literature deals with congregations, as do the Church of Scotland and the United Reform Church. The Church of England has appointed priests to the cure of souls in the geographical area of the parish. The appointment of IMs in some English dioceses, however, appears to be in response to increasing awareness of the need to ensure the “health” of congregations. This interest has arisen from a renewed mission perspective within the church, and awareness that the congregation is the living paradigm of the gospel, giving it flesh and authenticity.

The need to concentrate on the health of a congregation may well indicate the priority for future vicars, who are, at present, often torn between the demands of the volunteers whose assistance they need

the resulting questions asked in a congregation. The quoted remarks are from my journal, dated 3 June 2011.

19. Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, p. 35.

20. See the United Church of Canada: [www.united-church.ca/files/handbooks/interimministry.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/files/handbooks/interimministry.pdf) (accessed 1 December 2010) and [www.bristol.anglican.org/ministry/strategy/downloads/RTE%20Strategy%20Overview](http://www.bristol.anglican.org/ministry/strategy/downloads/RTE%20Strategy%20Overview) (accessed 3 March 2011).

21. Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, p. 30.

and the requirements of Canon Law to meet the requests of all parishioners for baptism, wedding and burial. The increasing power of the worshipping congregation, essential to the mission of the church and whose giving finances the church, strongly indicates that the vicar will be accountable to them. The Church of England may claim, and aspire, to serve the whole community, but the implicit message is that the congregation must take priority.

*Changing Working Conditions of Incumbency*

The literature on interim ministry stresses the importance of a letter of agreement between the IM and the local church, identifying the goals, tasks, and responsibilities of the IM, recording terms of service and remuneration.<sup>22</sup> The value of such clarification is recognized in the provisions of Common Tenure, which requires a statement of particulars for each office-holder.<sup>23</sup> I did not, however, have such an agreement and initial confusion in the parish over my title revealed how novel the idea of a fixed-term appointment is. The idea that I was both a vicar and temporary appeared to be the hardest thing for the congregations to accept. The assistance I gave was, in the main, warmly welcomed but the title “short-term vicar” or “interim vicar” was treated as an oxymoron.<sup>24</sup> As ordained ministry is re-imagined for the world after Christendom, the newly introduced ministry of IMs, who have no inherited authority, indicates the present necessity of clarification and justification of the role of ordained minister.

The relationship between a role, established by a psychological contract and the status that legitimizes that role is changing.<sup>25</sup> Implicit ecclesial and familial relationships are giving way to explicit and contractual relationships; a radical change in understanding for both priest and congregation. Clarity in relationships may be a major factor in moving from a parent-child relationship, with unwritten expectations and ill-defined emotional obligations, to adult/adult relationships.<sup>26</sup> But, as I approached the end of an initial six-month licence I found that, under Common Tenure, fixed-term appointments are only allowed in exceptional and closely defined circumstances. The flexibility which enables

22. Ken Ornell and Molly Dale Smith, “Why Have a Letter of Agreement?” in Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, pp. 38–47.

23. For details of Common Tenure, the framework for clergy conditions of service, see [www.common tenure.org](http://www.common tenure.org) (accessed 2 February 2011).

24. Journal entry dated 8 December 2010.

25. Avis discusses Weber’s categories in Paul Avis, *Authority, Leadership and Conflict in the Church* (London: Mowbray 1992), p. 57.

26. Loren B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute Publications, 1994), p. 100.

creative work to done by an IM in a time of transition prevents the precise definition that would satisfy the legislation. It was decided to treat me as employed, with "Permission to Officiate" in the parishes.

My own reaction was to feel de-motivated. No longer a licensed pastor with a mandate to assist change but, it seemed, simply plugging a gap, my perception of my role changed. My journal records perplexity and the realization of the importance of a clear sense of identity for the practice of ministry. The relationship between the congregation and me now seemed to be a contractual one, more like a hireling than a true shepherd. Soon after this decision I was appointed to another post and I began the process of departure.

The introduction of Common Tenure, legally established working hours and holidays and other terms of service might create a working environment that more closely resembles that of the IM than of incumbents with freehold tenure of the benefice. The implications for the espoused theology of incumbency are discussed in the next section.

#### *A Complex Task*

The fourth factor affecting the operant theology of incumbency concerns the complexity of the task facing ordained leaders. The Interim Ministry Network was established in 1980 to bring together expertise and training resources for congregations in transition and those who work as IMs. An IM must have a set of skills that comes from experience in parochial ministry, and speedily joining then connecting with the local Christian community. She must know how to help the congregation to focus on the future of the parish and encourage lay ownership of the church. An IM will also need some particular skills: problem solving, group facilitation, transition management, long and short-term planning, stress management, community and team building and administration are all suggested.<sup>27</sup> An understanding of family systems as it relates to congregations,<sup>28</sup> use of the skill of appreciative enquiry<sup>29</sup> and advanced pastoral skills are recommended. She will also need to understand the causes of conflict in local churches and have the skills to make creative use of it.<sup>30</sup> She needs to be calm, objective,

27. Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, pp. 33-34 and the Interim Ministry Handbook of the United Church of Canada, <http://www.united-church.ca/files/handbooks/interimministry.pdf> (accessed 14 January 2011).

28. David R. Sawyer, "The Church in Transition as a Human System," in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, pp. 26-38. In this analysis, Sawyer views the church as a human system, held together by rules, roles and rituals.

29. Rob Voyle Smith, "What is the Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Transition?" in Smith, *Transitional Ministry*, pp. 75-88.

30. Terry E. Foland, "Understanding Conflict and Power," in Nicholson, *Temporary*

and trustworthy, experienced in parish ministry and able to manage themselves in a context of uncertainty.<sup>31</sup> This set of skills is essential to win the confidence of the congregation and achieve significant change in the limited time available.

The final task of the IM, identified by the Network is to prepare to welcome the new incumbent. The care with which this process is described is an indication of the difficulties facing the new appointee. Loren Mead challenges the view that there is any “honeymoon” but states that the period after arrival is one of negotiation, during which both congregation and pastor must be ready for the hard work of confrontation and listening.<sup>32</sup> The first months, as a new relationship is established, are a time of anxiety and expectation.

This analysis of the complexity of working with a congregation is a reminder of the demands made of a vicar appointed on a longer timescale. Sara Savage concluded that the benefits of the parish system are many, but that the burden of maintaining it falls on the vicar. Motivating the “settled blancmange” that is the congregation and satisfying the expectations of the parish, clergy are stretched to breaking point.<sup>33</sup>

### *Espoused Theology of Incumbency*

Interim Ministry has highlighted facets of the operant theology of incumbency through observation of the implicit theology of structures and practices and the ordinary theology of congregations. We now ask what it reveals about the espoused theology of incumbency; the church members’ own articulation of their beliefs.

There is an extensive literature on the theology of priesthood, and considerable reflection on the practice of incumbency, but the focus is on how things should be rather than how they are. Such material explores a formal rather than espoused theology. Attempting to re-assert

*Shepherds*, pp. 39–51. Foland notes that churches commonly fight about the kinds of issues that IMs are appointed to address: identity, worship, role expectation of leaders, limited resources, and clergy misconduct.

31. Paul Svingen, “The Interim Minister—a Special Calling,” in Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds*, pp. 56–62. See also The Intentional Growth Center, which trains Interim Ministers for the United Methodist Church, for personal characteristics of the IM <http://events.r20.constantcontact.com/register/event?oeidk=a07e33sdk7mbd a197be&llr=ozzg4xn6>

32. Mead, *Change of Pastors*, p. 13.

33. Sara Savage, “On the Analyst’s Couch: Psychological Perspectives on Congregations and Clergy,” in Steven Croft (ed.), *The Future of the Parish System Shaping the Church of England for the 21st Century* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), pp. 16–32.

a Christian understanding of leadership, Steven Croft, for example, explores the *potential* of the threefold order of bishop, priest and deacon, while John Pritchard suggests ideal images of priesthood: spiritual explorer, artful storyteller, wounded companion, friendly irritant, and flower arranger.<sup>34</sup> Both the traditional images and the newly minted ones offer fertile reflection but, in the terms described by the authors, they are not ones in common currency in church life. The experience of Interim Ministry, handling the transition between ordained leaders, enables examination of the espoused theology of pastoral charge. Avery Dulles believes that congregations need models of the church for their own self-understanding and my own experience of loss of role suggests that theological models are just as necessary for the self-understanding and motivation of ministerial leadership.<sup>35</sup> Priestly identity is shaped by the models that are presented by Scripture and the Church and these may be compared with the models with which IMs work. This dialogue identified the models of monarch, shepherd and head of the family. Each expresses a relational model of leadership, but with significantly different perspectives.

#### *Monarch*

The reference to a “ministerial vacancy” rather than an “interregnum” marks a fall in popularity of the monarchical model as “collaborative ministry” gains ascendancy, but practice demonstrates its persistent influence. After the departure of the incumbent, responsibility for covering the needs of the parish for regular worship and pastoral contact is in the hands of the churchwardens, though there may also be a considerable number of licensed and volunteer ministers. In the past churchwardens have been instructed not to change anything. There is a conflict between the natural processes of transition and the view that, during an “interregnum” it would not be right to alter what may then be changed by the next incumbent. This deference follows from the understanding that, once holding the benefice by freehold, the new incumbent as sole authority. The ownership of the benefice is still given to a new incumbent in a symbol-laden ceremony of institution. With echoes of a coronation, it is also a reminder of feudal character of the relationship of bishop and priest. Both personal anecdote, and the survey of Self-Supporting

34. Steven Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008); John Pritchard, *Being a Priest Today* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006). However, because of a confused conflation between the two, in another sense almost all of the literature on priesthood is about parish ministry.

35. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2nd edn, 1988).

Ministers records the number of assistant lay and ordained ministers who feel a significant loss of status at this point.<sup>36</sup>

The tenor of The Patronages (Benefices) Measure 1986 is to keep the vacancy as short as possible, requiring the parish to meet to decide on a number of crucial issues within four weeks of receiving the notice of vacancy from the Registrar. Though the description of the church's needs may be delayed over several months, this may not give sufficient time for the church to identify its character and vocation independent of the preferences of the recently departed minister.<sup>37</sup> The message communicated is that the parish cannot be expected to flourish in the absence of an incumbent.

The image of a monarch is now unlikely to attract explicit support, but that of shepherd has been a guiding metaphor in devotional material and the ordinal. The literature on interim ministry, however, has made use of family system theory to analyse congregations. The family model also has biblical and liturgical roots, but I note some conflict with that of shepherd and flock.

### *Shepherd*

The image of shepherd occurs many times in the Bible and with a consistent message. The people of God are God's flock (e.g. Ps. 100.2), and they need a shepherd. While the majority of references are to God as the shepherd, human rulers may also be given this role and act as his deputy: Joshua (Num. 27.17), David (2 Sam. 2; 1 Chron. 11.12; Pss. 78, 71), other tribal leaders (2 Sam. 7.7) and even a foreigner, Cyrus (Isa. 44.28). God will replace false shepherds (Ezek. 34.16) and also send the coming Messiah to act as the true shepherd (Isa. 40.11). Jesus' announcement of himself as the Good Shepherd was, therefore, seen as a messianic claim (Jn 10.10).

Christ is recorded as handing the commission to be the shepherd of the flock to Peter (Jn 21.15-19), though Paul, in his final address, exhorts all leaders of the new Christian congregations to be worthy of their calling to be shepherds (Acts 20.28). Ultimate authority, however, remains with God, who will rule/shepherd his people with an iron rod (Rev. 2.27).

There is good biblical precedent for describing the leadership of the Christian community in these terms though it is an image now more

36. Teresa Morgan, *Survey of Self-Supporting Ministers*, found at [www.1pf.co.uk/SSM.html](http://www.1pf.co.uk/SSM.html) (accessed 10 April 2011).

37. The way to circumvent this is to treat each vacancy as an opportunity for pastoral re-organization: <http://www.bristol.anglican.org/ministry/strategy/downloads/RTE%20Strategy%20Overview.pdf> (accessed 20 March 2011).

used by those writing about the practicalities of ministry (the “pastoral” ministry) than by authors exploring the theology of ordination. Language of shepherding is, however, powerfully present in the ordinal. In the Book of Common Prayer, deacons are “to search for the sick, poor and impotent people of the parish.”<sup>38</sup> The reference is more explicit in the ordination of priests, where the two set Gospel readings are from John 10 and Mt. 9.36. The priests are charged to “seek for Christ’s sheep that are dispersed abroad” as “they are the sheep of Christ, which he brought with his death.” Both the collect and the readings at the consecration of bishops refer to the charge to the apostle Peter to care for God’s flock: “Be to the flock of Christ a shepherd, not a wolf: feed them, devour them not...”

In *Common Worship* the deacon’s works is pastoral: “searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless.”<sup>39</sup> Priests, in addition, are: “called to be servants and shepherds among the people to whom they are sent [...] they are to teach and to admonish, to feed and provide for his family, to search for his children in the wilderness of this world’s temptations.” The image of shepherd offers ample resources to affirm the vicar who envisages himself or herself as God’s deputy. The metaphor suggests a radical distinction between clergy and those, the sheep, who are led. As a different species from the shepherd, no personal relationship is captured by the image. Furthermore, this model implies that the church is static; the need for a continual search for new pasture has been forgotten. The biblical metaphor has become adapted to a warm, damp and therefore fertile climate.

### Parent

Although there is plenty of material written for lay and ordained pastors on what it means to be a shepherd, I have found no contemporary reflection on what it means to be part of “a flock.” It may, indeed seem rather derogatory to be described as “sheep.” Being part of a new family, especially in a world in which other relationships are fragmenting, appears much more attractive. It is Family System theory which is employed by the Interim Ministry Network to analyse congregations.<sup>40</sup>

38. Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer 1662* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1999).

39. The Ordinal of Common Worship was published in 2006 and is available at <http://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/ordinal.aspx> (accessed 4 January 2011).

40. Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985), also Sawyer, “The Church in Transition as a Human System,” pp. 26–38.

Many of the biblical stories are tales of family life, but they are usually of dysfunctional families; whether the patriarchs', the kings' or Jesus' own family which he turned away (Mk 3.31-35). Jesus inaugurated a new family, no longer dependent on ethnic ties (Mt. 3.9) but on welcome to the new household of faith (Eph. 2.19). This is the family that calls God its Father and in which each are equal as brothers and sisters; adopted children and joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8.16-17).

The words of welcome spoken at the service of Baptism are a reminder that "we are children of the same heavenly Father."<sup>41</sup> A family is what a local church aspires to be. The former popularity of "Family Services," frequent reference to the local church as a family and the habit of some parts of the Church of England of calling the priest "Father," and even, sometimes, "Mother," all contribute to the strength of this metaphor in minds and hearts.

Family System theory understands families as emotional systems impacted by the level of anxiety within the system and by the level of differentiation between its members. A change in one person's functioning is followed by changes in other members that can be anticipated. The theory is now widely applied to organizations; wherever there are strong supportive, long-term roles and relationships, resulting in a degree of interdependence. This description fits what many churches understand by the phrase; "We are the Body of Christ."

As I have listened to conversations about present and past experience of ordained leadership I have heard a diversity of emotions: tales of gratitude, of resentment and of suspicion. It has been particularly illuminating to listen to the mixed messages about the future. The incoming Team Vicar must both "mix in," "not come with an agenda" and "take a lead," or "be our guide."<sup>42</sup> Coming from sources otherwise in agreement with each other, this is the language of ambivalence surrounding parental influence expressed by growing children rather than a conflict in ecclesiological understanding. I can see how discussions about the nature of leadership that is required in a congregation could as well be expressed as a discussion about parenting styles. The family model, while being at first more attractive than the pastoral, might also encourage the intense confrontations found in family life.

41. <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1190836/holy%20baptism.pdf> (accessed 26 November 2011).

42. Journal entries dated 5 September 2010, 9 January 2011.

*Conclusion*

Each model has its implications for the operation of leadership and for relationships within the congregation. The pastoral model is used to describe a settled, indeed lifelong, ministry of care, protection and nurture, which, in recent centuries, has been marked by residency and permanence. It is now an image that is not owned by the congregation. Interim ministry, which has made a close study of congregational life, has observed that the favoured image is of the family. It is relationships within the family of the church, not with the parochial flock, that the vicar must learn to create and sustain. It is family relationships, modelled on contemporary experiences of Western nuclear families rather than the radical new household of faith, that create the intensity of fellowship and conflict experienced in church life; feelings magnified during ministerial vacancies. Trauma is not so surprising if congregational dynamics are seen in terms of family relationships. It is the departure of the head of the family, who is the ordained leader, which causes so much disruption. Whilst a flock, after a period of uncertainty, might receive a new shepherd, a relationship with a new parent is fraught with anxiety.

Two theological models of church life, that of family and of flock, have entered the imagination, but in unequal measure amongst clergy and lay. While some priests may think of themselves as “Father” to their parish, this paternal image is not contained in the liturgy of ordination and, as shown above, amongst clergy the role of a shepherd is preferred. The model of family life, however, is alive and strong and has considerable effect in congregational life. The two models are not incompatible, but there is potential for misunderstanding between clergy and lay people when there is not a shared language about roles and expectations. There is an even greater danger that full time incumbents may imagine that they are entering a world in which role descriptions, working time agreements and all the ramifications of Common Tenure will shape their ministry. The image of family and of shepherd may not be incompatible but both sit uneasily in the rational, bureaucratic world of Common Tenure. The introduction of Common Tenure may well correct some of the abuses of the former arrangements, indeed it seems designed to regulate the ill-defined expectations and open-ended working commitments of traditional models. But it is a contractual relationship, which fails to appreciate the emotional bond that develops between vicar and congregation; a bond made most apparent at the time of its rupture.

The experience of interim ministry has revealed much about the theology and practice of full-time incumbency in the Church of England. I recognize that the narrow range of my experience invalidates broad conclusions, yet it has not contradicted the insights of other Interim

Ministers in this country and abroad. A lot has been asserted about the practice of incumbency. Congregations will experience some degree of trauma at the end of a relationship with their ordained leadership, regardless of church tradition and even of the “success” or otherwise of the ministry. This is because of the intense nature of that relationship. It is emotional; positioned between the local church and the diocese and, increasingly focused on the relationship with the congregation, rather than the parish. Interim Ministry has recognized the complexity of the task of ordained leadership and provided training for it and for a transition from traditional or charismatic modes of authority to a rational-legal framework for leadership. The theology of incumbency, held in the practice of congregations and diocesan authorities, is seen to be multifaceted. Theological models of monarchy, shepherding and family headship co-exist, perhaps because they are not defined. In contrast, and perhaps in conflict, Common Tenure is a clear expression of role and expectation. The practice and theology of incumbency is, like a church in vacancy, itself in transition.

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