



Upskilling our clergy to manage change

The Ven Libby Wilkinson – Archdeacon of Durham

The Ven Libby Wilkinson has served 6 years as Archdeacon of Durham with responsibility for Mission, Discipleship & Ministry (effectively Director of Mission and Ministry), during which she has, with colleagues in the diocese, developed a

programme for employing Interim Change Ministers.

‘One of the things I have focused on is what it means to be a healthy church in terms of attitude and ethos, spirituality and mission. My catch-all phrase is; given the resources we have, where we are placed, and the people we have, what is the healthiest we can be?’ explains Archdeacon Libby. As well as ‘sense checking’ what needs to change through the vacancy audit partnership (VAP), it is about exploring how to tackle deep-rooted problems in some parishes.

Archdeacon Libby explains: ‘VAP can identify where there are blockages to mission, financial issues, governance issues, including toxic relationships that vicars have had to wrestle with. We know there are places with repeating issues and wanted to do something about it. We didn’t want the ICM role to be about holding the fort, so we identified the needs and send the ICM in with a clear brief. Without a clear brief, it just ends up disabling the process.’

She put careful thought into working out how to make these roles work best for the diocese and for the appointees. It has worked extremely well for the diocese. ‘We have also found it easier to recruit high calibre clergy for these roles,’ she notes. ‘For the ICMs there are clear benefits: they have the security of being employees, and they get to live in their own home, which for clergy nearing retirement may offer the opportunity of getting a mortgage as they are employed, which would not be as easy at retirement... though we’re interested in younger candidates too, ‘experienced’ doesn’t necessarily mean near retirement.’

She came from a change management background and understood what was needed for the role, having worked as a business analyst and trouble shooter for national insurance company, Norwich Union. ‘I had the power and authority in that role, but that’s not enough. I needed to win people over and help them see the benefits of change as well as the potential costs. I needed soft skills that IMs need to manage change,’ explains Archdeacon Libby.

‘IMs need, if not experience of change management, then a heart for change management and working with people; IMs need the soft skills of people management: persuasion, encouragement affirmation. You cannot bring change with forceful tactics, or it will be a disaster. You need to be analytical to see what needs doing but you also need the people skills to make it happen. All the analytical skills in the world won’t help if people hate you.’

She has also made some unique choices in developing ICM: ‘We are deliberately using a different language, because we do not want ICM to be about holding the fort, as IM has been in some places.’ Durham also chose not to use the IM legislation for the roles: ‘Making clergy employees for these roles wasn’t straightforward, but we felt it was important for these specific roles. We needed to know that, if it wasn’t working, we could pull them out. It felt less risky. And people get to live in their own homes which they appreciate.’

She is already seeing the need for this skill set more widely in ministry: ‘This needs to start featuring in role descriptions for clergy; we need people who can do this as part of the bread and butter job: clergy who can move on a cemented PCC or deal with an intransigent churchwarden; who can get past whatever the presenting issue is, see the way forward and take people with them. These skills need to be incorporated into IME2 and CMD – and we are looking at re-jigging the programme in Durham to include this.’

In terms of impact Archdeacon Libby points out: ‘It is not as simple as success and failure. Success can be seen in lots of different ways, like: How easy is it to appoint afterwards? Is it more viable than before? Has the brief been achieved? It might be as simple as being able to appoint churchwardens, or the church considering how it can work better with the community.’ It might be much more radical than that too – one size definitely doesn’t fit all.

Having pioneered a new approach to interim ministry, Durham fully intends to continue developing the model: ‘We are not short of places to put ICMs, we could do with more. What it’s showing me is that this is a really important skill for clergy,’ says Archdeacon Libby. ‘There is something for me about traditional pastoral parish ministry, in itself, is not always going to be enough to bring about significant change. Good pastoral ministry, done well, will always be missionally attractive. But you need to be able to do more than this.’