

FOLLOW THAT! HOW TO SUCCEED A SUCCESSFUL MINISTRY

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When I was appointed to my previous post the most frequently asked question was "How does it feel following such an illustrious predecessor?" My answers ranged from "Fine" to "It doesn't worry me" or "I haven't really thought about it". In fact it's only eight and a half years later, as I am about to leave, that I've given it any thought at all. When I came to that parish, I succeeded a theologian of world-repute, the author of several highly acclaimed books and one acknowledged to be one of the finest preachers of his generation. How do you follow that? I firmly believe that the heart of the answer is "In the same way as one would anyone else"! Whereas I may have followed someone world-famous in national and international Christian circles, each one of us when we begin a new ministry follow someone who is 'world-famous' in the local church and community in which they have ministered. They may well have conducted their ministry on a relatively small stage, but one hopes that they have been acknowledged for their gifts in at least some areas of ministerial life.

A matter of trust

The advice and principles to pursue in following on from our predecessor in every case are all based on trust. Trust that the last minister will stay away (easier if they have moved to the other end of the country, but letters, phone-calls and e-mails can quickly overcome the miles). The position can be harder when the minister has retired and struggling to adjust to new circumstances and new roles in life, church and society. Moving on to a new ministry ought to mean that they are far too busy to dabble in their previous church's life. Trust that the congregation will not be forever on the phone to them giving them a blow-by-blow account of your every move and reporting back what your predecessor says they would have done in the situation. Trust that the congregation will learn to have good yet realistic memories of their last and much-loved pastor (in some cases it will be the first time that they have done!). Every minister is a rounded, human individual, with their strengths and weaknesses, their attractive and more difficult sides, the areas of work in which they have shone and those in which they struggled. A congregation will hold their previous

minister in respect and honour if they remember them for who they truly were – with neither rose-tinted spectacles nor as a scapegoat for all the church's present ills. In some places, church meetings and councils will need a firm rule that no discussion begins with or includes the words "In the Revd X's day we...". It may (or may not) be a statement of fact but it is certainly not a reason for doing or not doing something.

The other side of the case

There's another side to this. The last minister had an important role in the life of the church and in the lives of its members. This needs to be honoured and respected. It is all too easy for a new minister to take the approach often encountered when visiting a new dentist for the first time. Their first cursory look in the mouth is usually followed by words along the lines of "Who on earth looked after these teeth before you came to this practice?". The last minister will have done some things in the life of the church well and will have made some mistakes along the way, but - so will we!

He or she will also have played an important part in the lives of some members of the congregation at key moments (birth, marriage, bereavement, divorce, illness, call to ministry). Both they and that minister will need a considerable time to grieve the ending of that pastoral relationship and adjust to new ones. I have no problem with people keeping in touch with the previous minister as a friend, on the understanding that, while they are good friends, I am their minister. My experience of having moved on from three churches is that in each case I have not been able to predict who as a family we have kept in touch with. There have been surprises each time as to who have become or stayed friends.

An invitation to return

There will be occasions when it is appropriate and right to invite the minister back. In my first eighteen months in the parish my predecessor spoke at the funerals of the wife of a former churchwarden and of a former non-stipendiary colleague. It was right that he should because he had known them well in their lives and ministry and I had hardly got to know them (or had known them only in frailty and illness, privilege though that was). He, however, spoke with conviction and experience of their life and faith in a way that I could not. I was also quite happy to go back to a previous church myself to open a new building - the work for

which had started in my time and was completed a few months after I had left. There have also been some occasions when I have not been afraid to phone up a previous minister to ask their advice or clarify a piece of the church's story from their perspective. I have only ever done this for my own information and background, and never to use in a public discussion or debate.

I believe these attitudes help to break down a possessiveness and parochialism (in the wrong sense of the word) amongst clergy. There is far too much of a spirit abroad of "You in your small corner and I in mine - and don't you dare come into mine!" For those of us who are appointed to lead a church from outside of its membership, it is salutary and important to remember that we will be but one part in the life and history of God's work in that place and not the be all and end all of it. The panic question that is asked when your own move is announced - "How will we cope without you?" - needs to be answered along the lines of "If my ministry here has been fruitful and effective, you will cope well."

Following on...

The best way to follow a predecessor, whoever they are, is to be self-affirming of the gifts, graces and abilities that God has given us in the firm belief that it has been his calling to be minister in that place. The authority and leadership is now vested in you by the church (local and/or national) and you are to live and pray and act like that. Failure to do this is not the fault of a predecessor but an indication of some important areas to address in our own lives.

The minister should have been appointed to lead the church into the next phase of its life and work, not simply to come and make sure that everything that good old Bill or Betty did continues in perpetuity. (I would not take on a church or position if that was the expectation). I have clearly not been my predecessor and I fervently hope that my successor is not me, nor expected to be me. I have to believe and I do believe that he was God's choice in his time, that I have been so for the past eight and a half years and that the next man or woman who is minister will be so too.

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