

struggle continues to discern and challenge prejudice and to realise the perfect freedom of Christ.

The 'big issue' is to discover the truth together in love. Christians of whatever sexual orientation must be on the same side in seeking this truth. It is folly to fall out over this, as though some of us are failing Christians and others not. A cursory glance at the Old Testament laws is enough to convince us that truth has to travel across ages and cultures. To discover its meaning and relevance for us here and now is both our duty and our joy. "Don't go there"? I'm glad that we have to! And for discussion: What will our church look like if we 'get it right'?

Andrew Knowles is Canon Theologian in the Anglican Diocese of Chelmsford.

THE MINISTRY OF LITTLE THINGS

Ian Stackhouse

Ministry often occurs in the most unlikely and unpromising places. For those of us brought up in the world of evangelicalism, this is a hard thing to accept. Ministry is associated with the recognisable offices of the church, taking place in the community of the church. And for this numerous programmes and strategies have been devised. There is nothing particularly wrong with that. It would be hard to conceive of an effective church community without them.

But the problem with the programmed approach is that it does not account for the many other places where ministry really takes place. Ministry, in the sense of bringing the living Christ to bear upon people, is something that often bypasses our arranged and programmatic attempts at growth, occurring instead in the rather messy business of human interaction.

Increasingly (and, I might add, somewhat reluctantly!) I have come to see this to be the case, because time and again the reports from the field confirm that those small incidents, what some might call sacramental moments - the cup of water offered in Jesus' name - is the place where Christ is actually being experienced. Ministry takes place not so much in the intentional activities arranged by the church, in which Christians consciously seek to

bring Christ into the frame. Rather, it occurs in those unselfconscious moments - the visit made to the hospital, the meal around the table, the word of encouragement, the being there in a time of grief and just listening - so that only in retrospect can we see its impact. It took a while for me to admit this, and even longer to accept it, because those of us brought up on a diet of church growth thought ministry would be far more visionary, far more strategic. We thought that the accumulated wisdom of our staff meetings, and leadership equipping would do the job. And indeed in some senses they do. However, what they fail to account for, and very often fail to nurture, are those serendipitous acts done by ordinary Christians, often on the basis of some inner prompting, which in the end accomplish far more in the kingdom by virtue of their inspiration in God.

Jesus of course said it would be like this. The parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25.31ff), with its 'when did we see you naked?' reply by the sheep and the goats, attests to the power of unselfconscious Christianity that celebrates this sacramentality. If Jesus had wanted to commend our grand designs he would have written something more of a manual about how to build the kingdom. As it is he leaves a few hints about where we might discern the fingerprints of God, and more often than not they are upon the small things, the seemingly incidental things. Jesus really meant it when he said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

Paul, wandering down to the riverside in Philippi and finding some women at prayer, is of the same order - a chance encounter that leads to the colonising of this garrison town with the people of God. That we don't discern these opportunities very often says more about our self-made agendas than it does about the efficacy of such moments. But once we recognise them they become a source of endless adventure as we gladly put away our vision statements and get on with the real and often messy task of ministry. Does that mean we can justify sloppiness and irresponsibility? Not so. Merely that we remember that ministry often takes place between the lines of our scripted sermons - the off-the-cuff comment, the suddenly fresh angle that illuminates the text - so that even our preaching becomes something of a sacramental act.

I am one of those who believe that preaching has not had its day. Obsession about relevancy for our post-modern listeners will eventually wear out and someone will ask for a preacher to come down off the mountain with tidings of great joy. I really do believe this will be the case. There are signs already of a resurgence of preaching. But pertinent to the revival is the question: where even in the act of preaching does the ministry occur? In the faithful interpretation of the text? In the correct parsing of the Greek verbs? In the homiletical charisma of the preacher? All of them undoubtedly are critical to the task of preaching. But is it not also in the openness of the preacher and the congregation to that nouminal element, which has always been central to the act of preaching, whereby we encounter Christ himself in the sacrament of the word.

Such a view of preaching may seem in today's world hopelessly outdated. The present technology of communications leaves no such place for this surprise element, where in our faltering attempts at communication God seems to adopt our words and speak to his people. Similarly in our faltering and stammering prayers the Holy Spirit accomplishes his work, far more than our angst-driven programs, and exotic prayer strategies. These are groans that words cannot express, through which the Spirit himself is interceding. If we wonder sometimes if they make any difference, one only has to pay attention to the Revelation of St John. There we see that the incense of our prayers eventually 'boomerang' upon the earth with devastating effect; the fragments of our worship get caught up in the heavenly worship around the throne; and to cap it all our witness, which we know is not what it should be, really does mean salvation for the world. In the end mercy triumphs over judgement, and critical to it all is the ministry of small things.

Ian Stackhouse is the Senior Pastor of Guildford Baptist Church.