

**Diocesan Celebration
of 15 Years of Local Ministry and
the ministry of Bishop Michael Hooper**

Sunday 28th June 2000 at 3.30pm

The news broadcaster brings to an end the National and International News by saying “and now we go over to the news where you are”. This celebration of Local Ministry today is very much a celebration of where you are. We have all come to the Cathedral to celebrate this wonderful occasion of 15 years of Local Ministry, and we have come to the centre of the Diocese to do it, but it is essentially where you are.

It was reported in the Church Times recently that Professor Sarah Coakely returned to Britain after 15 years in the United States of America. She said that the time abroad had given her an outsider’s view. She was greatly encouraged by two things. First, the parish system and our commitment to staying in difficult places and the renewed and growing “theological vigour”.

Local Ministry, as we call it, is a commitment to all our communities however small, and however difficult, it may be to maintain a presence. This goes hand in hand with encouraging the ministry of every member of the Church, of all the baptised. This is very much what Sarah is talking about.

And in over more than 15 years we have grown in confidence in the Gospel. This is very much the result of Framework for Faith study courses and other courses laid on through the Training Department. As a result there has been growth in Christian discipleship and in a local way there has been growing “theological vigour”.

The Report “2015 Onwards” is most clearly a challenge to us all to move on. I have been encouraged by the response to the consultations in every Deanery about this Report. There have been some misunderstandings, but there always are about reports. Some people have concentrated on what the Report does not include and have been critical of it, but that can in many ways be an avoidance of what it definitely does say.

An important key in the report to the future - is “oversight”. There is a commitment, and has been over many years in this Diocese, to a collaborative style of ministry and shared leadership – clergy and lay people together. Oversight is crucial with so many parishes grouped together. The day has gone when one or two parishes had their own vicar and carried on in a certain style. This style is no longer possible when there are 6, 8, or even 10 or more parishes grouped together. Sometimes the cry goes up – “Where are all the lay people coming from?” or, “They are all so busy”. I think I have discerned that that cry comes from places where the keynote is control. In that style lay people become “the Vicar’s helpers”, whereas “oversight” is totally different and it is about enabling, encouraging, developing and sharing and allowing people to grow, exercising ministry and being able to be allowed to make mistakes. This is more laid back, more skilled and vital for the future. There is also a very important theological point that control is the opposite of love. It is the opposite of how God deals with us. God surrounds us by love and gives us the most enormous freedom and this must be at the heart of how we organise ourselves and exercise ministry.

Oversight then is not about control and it is also not about management. It is about holding the whole. It is like presiding at the Eucharist. When the priest or bishop presides over the Eucharistic assembly, they do not control

it, or manage it, but preside in such a way that everybody else can play their part in the whole body and action.

It is important too that we get away from class and gender distinctions between categories of ordained ministry – stipendiary – self supporting – Ordained Local Ministry, men, women, young and old. I know they are not supposed to exist any more but they do! It is really a question of the gifts of each priest, not whether they receive a stipend or not.

Bishop Anthony and I are committed to Ordained Local Ministry and we long to see more Ordained Local Ministers throughout the Diocese. There are huge misconceptions about this and it is not about containing people or controlling people or keeping them within fixed boundaries. It is essentially saying they are committed to the local area and so are selected locally, trained locally and exercise ministry locally. They are committed to the local and it is not expected that they will be sent all over the place to keep the show on the road, but are preaching and teaching and living out the ministry cheek by jowl, side by side with the people with whom they live. This is a protection for the Ordained Local Minister and the local community of the Church. We have ten Ordained Local Ministers in the Diocese at the moment and two of them are in positions of leadership and oversight and doing extremely well. Don't put them in boxes – when the local meets the apostolic, that is the priest and people who are sent in from outside – when these two meet together, co-operate together, work together, then there is huge strength, vision, time and energy to move forward. It is the Local Ministry Development Group or Team and the Ordained Local Minister who give stability to the Church, where you are.

There is then a challenge to the parishes to grow their own ministry. To call people, get into the mode of every member ministry and develop oversight. This is the challenge to us all, right across the Diocese.

The challenge to the leadership of the Diocese is to enable training and education locally. I am not talking about individual training but the Local Ministry Development Groups and Teams training together with their clergy. Those who train together will then minister together and have a real understanding and develop collaborative ministry. Out of these groups we look for all manner of vocations to develop, including the Ordained Local Minister. This local training together is so very, very important. It could be done on a Deanery basis or a Team or a Group of Parishes, but it needs to be done in such a way that the best resources are harnessed to enable it to happen. It may well mean that some people study something several times. However when you do it as a group different people bring new insights and there are always new things to learn. It is a disaster when a group starts to look at the Gospels, for example, and somebody says “Oh, I studied that at theological college 30 years ago – I know all about that”. There is a need to do it again and to do it together and to learn from one another and grow together. This is a massive piece of work and we are bound to be looking to the new Adult Education Officer and Local Ministry Officer to work together to bring this about.

The Gospel today was about changing water into wine and the steward spoke with alarm about keeping the best wine till last. All I have been talking about we have been doing and committed to for a very long time, but I sense we are on the threshold of a new push forward, new development which brings hope and excitement for the future.

It will only work if we are committed to a life of prayer. At the heart of Jesus' life and ministry was his union with the Father through time spent with him. This is not bashing at God, as if he were some magician, to bring about change, but a deep union through waiting and contemplative silence so that we are completely united with the Father in the power of the Spirit through Christ. Then and then only shall we be about the perfect will of God and bring it into being for his church and all humanity.