



One of the reasons I am encouraged by Scripture is that God's people are generally so inept! It was true of the disciples arguing over who was the greatest, it was true of Peter at the last supper, it was true of God's chosen people of Israel, especially in the wilderness. Once Egypt had been their salvation. It had saved them from starvation, but over time things had gone bad and the Israelites became slaves only to be rescued by Moses, led through the Red Sea and into the Sinai on their way to the promised land. It did not go well and soon the people were complaining in the desert. The manna God had sent was not good enough. The rabble had a strong craving:

'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions the garlic but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at'. (Numbers 11 4 – 7)

The situation became no better as they got closer to the promised land and camped just on the border at Paran. From there Moses sent out men to spy on the land for forty days to go and see if the land was good or bad and whether the towns were un-walled or fortified and if the land was rich or poor, noting that it was the season of the *first ripe grapes* (Numbers 13: 20)

The spies returned with their reports and they told Moses:

'We came to the land to which you sent us and it flows with milk; honey... yet the people in the land are strong and the towns are fortified and large. (Numbers 13: 27)

The future looked good, but they were scared

Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we." So they brought to the Israelites an unfavourable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size... and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, ... (Numbers 13: 32-33)

And the people rebelled:

"Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" (Numbers 14: 2 – 4)

They formed a 'Let's Get Back to Egypt Committee', and we have been forming them ever since!

Now I certainly do not want to imply that Interim Ministers are to be spies. Indeed to be effective I think it is essential that IMs work within an agreed framework and in an open and transparent way even though some aspects of their work may be confidential. However there is a sense that they are operating in the wilderness with memories of an (alleged) golden past in Egypt behind and a promised land before and are therefore sent to search out the new landscape that the church is called to inhabit.

It is significant to note that IMs are sent out. IMs are by their nature connected; they explore the place to which they are sent coming back to report and recommend to those who send. In our context that is to the Bishop and to the Diocesan Mission Committee who hold the oversight of the mission and ministry of the Church pastoral, evangelistic, social and ecumenical to which it must always 'have regard'. (Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011).

IMs working with the Bishops as part of the Diocesan Leadership will be those who have a clear understanding of the missional challenge facing the church today at a time when much of our traditional ministry is becoming unsustainable. They will have confidence to recognise and speak hard truths but they will also be confident in God and God's faithfulness as we seek to reimagine ministry and proclaim the Gospel afresh in this generation. With this in mind I want to propose a framework by which IMs might carry out their task and report back as together we seek to enable the people of God to look forward rather than back. This framework is: Theological, Pastoral, Practical and Spiritual.

It is perhaps obvious to say, but we need to begin our exploration with a confidence that we are 'doing **theology**', not as an isolated academic discipline but as essential to ensuring our journey is authentically that to which God calls. Such an approach needs to be thus Christological, with a focus on the Kingdom and an Anglican Ecclesiology. It is Christological in that it is rooted in the person of Jesus Christ who comes to dwell with his people with the offer of life in all its fullness, whose life the church is called to show forth in the world. It has a focus on the Kingdom since this is what Jesus came to proclaim, a church confident in singing the Magnificat with Mary, with the proud scattered, the mighty put down, the humble and meek exalted and fed and God's mercy made known. Lastly our theology must have an Anglican ecclesiology recognising the vocation of the Church of England to serve the nation and all its people, to exercise the 'cure of souls' and not to descend into congregationalism, but remain engaged with the communities in which we are set.

Such a theological approach is bound therefore by definition to be also **pastoral**, connected to and understanding of the needs of those in our care, even of those who might want 'to go back to Egypt'. This is not to say that the IM colludes, we are not going back to Egypt, but to understand, however hard it may be, that each person is made in the image of God and loved. A pastoral approach will seek to embody the teaching of Augustine of Hippo that we come not to God 'by navigation but by love'.

Pastoral but also **practical**. The experience of the wilderness for the people of Israel was that of managing their resources as they collected their daily manna. The IM will be acutely aware of the resources available to the church and the necessity of managing and stewarding these. This will be both of those of the community in which they are ministering and of the wider church. IM will have a highly developed sense of the ministry of the whole people of God, and of the need for the church's ordained ministers to lead and to collaborate. They will be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of physical plant and of the nature of money as profoundly spiritual in enabling ministry. They will be both realistic and ambitious and not afraid to challenge. The reports with which they return must be sustainable and deliverable as well as theological and pastoral!

Lastly the IM must have a profound and deep **spirituality**. IMs will need this first for themselves. The ministry in which they engage is often in arid places in which deep roots are needed to find the living water in Jesus Christ. With a deep faith themselves they will be passionate in enabling others to develop a similar thirst. An IM will want, often with limited resources, to offer the best of worship giving sometimes demoralised congregations a 'foretaste of the heavenly banquet', provide opportunity for a new exploration of prayer, that the people may be renewed and, with Christ in their hearts, they may glimpse afresh how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ to be filled with the measure of all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3: 18-19)

Returning to the book of Numbers, the people were afraid. Many wanted to go back; even among those who had spied out the land there were those who hesitated. We should be under no illusion that the work of the IM is anything but challenging, but a sufficient number of the people were tenacious, excited about the promised land flowing with milk and the honey that they wanted it for their children and their children's children.

IMs will be those who will provide that enthusiasm and courage and in reporting back and working with the Bishop and the Diocesan Mission and Partnership Committee and working with Archdeacons and Area Deans, building partnership and forging alliances, renewing hope building ambition, and in so doing they will help the people not look back but forward to the place God is calling.

As a postscript Moses of course did not enter the promised land and such is the nature of IM that more often than not this will be the case for such ministries – not that IMs should expect to die! Rather the ministry they exercise will cease as the new commences, that has been brought to birth as the waters of the Jordan are crossed which is why as a Church this is a ministry is something for which we must be thankful and encourage, walking with God's people to the promised land.

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