

The Vicar`s Tale

REV. PETER GREEN

Peter was ordained into the Church because of “a gut feeling that this is the way I`ve got to live my life”. Born in east London, he came to Milton Keynes after working in Sri Lanka and Sheffield. He is married with three children and lives on Downs Barn. With Gwen, his wife, he also runs a parish press which is based in their house. The print shop is in their kitchen; their bedroom houses typesetting equipment. In addition to his duties as vicar, Peter, like many of his colleagues these days, is deeply involved in community work, and in particular the Community Workshops.

I am part of the clergy team for the Stantonbury area, which is all of the grid squares north of the city centre. My first job was to see whether a Christian community could be developed there. There was already a tiny group of five or six people who were meeting before I arrived. They had been found by members of the Christ Church congregation and they included a number of people from Conniburrow and Downs Barn. We used to meet on Sunday mornings for worship. We met together, we prayed together, we attempted to sing – appallingly badly – and it started from there. We decided we`d meet once during the week as well for a time of thinking and studying, to see what happened. We originally met in the Small Meeting Place in Downs Barn and we gradually outgrew that and moved across to the school. It`s difficult to say why people become part of the growing Christian community, but they do, slowly.

Paid to live here

I see my role here as being very much the same as in any community. I think that the old title “parson” is quite a good word. One is a “persona”, the person who is around. I`m the only person on this estate who is actually paid to live here and to be here. When the people say:”Look, I`m paid not to be busy, I`m paid to have the time.“ It doesn`t always work out like that. One gets caught up with lots of things which may or may not be important, but theoretically I`m the person who is *there*. If it`s two o`clock in the morning and there`s no one else you can think of you ought to think:” Well, there`s someone who`s paid to be available and that`s the vicar.” So one gets a certain amount of counselling work but not all that much. One doesn`t try to do the work of Marriage Guidance. Obviously they are very busy so you do pick up a little bit but it`s not my specific skill. There is a certain amount of dealing with people who are disturbed or upset, and of course people who are bereaved or are planning marriage or baptism. And I suppose the “hatchings, matchings and dispatchings” part of the job does occupy quite a lot of time. In a sense I find that the most interesting part of the job because one is dealing with non-church people.

Church is always, in a sense, family, and there are advantages in getting outside the family from time to time.

The parish press is not really my job, my wife runs that. We started a community newspaper way back in 1973 and because we needed to print it we bought an offset litho machine. It's located in the kitchen of our house. You can do almost anything you like in a vicarage, and certainly you can print church material. Whether we print other things as well is of course another matter! Gwen takes the beginning of an income from the press and we do a very large amount of church work, not just local but national as well.

Part of my job brief was not only to build up a community of people – who are the *real* church – but to see if it was appropriate to erect a building for the church. In conjunction with the resident's association on Downs Barn, we decided on a building that wasn't just a church but a community centre and meeting place for the estate as well. We shall probably start building in 1985 on a site at the junction of Downs Barn Boulevard and Over Street. It'll be a church, community centre, vicarage and a block of six small commercial units. We shall probably rent one of these units as a print shop. We didn't ask the architect to make it look like a church. We asked for a building that would do certain things, that would be a church, a playgroup, a coffee bar and which would have an outside yard for the children to play in. We did say that we wanted at least one room that would be a chapel or quiet area – the shrine, if you like.

Unity is Not an Easy Option

The church in Milton Keynes, like anywhere else, is complex. The mainstream English churches, namely the Church of England, Methodist, Baptist and United Reformed Church, all work together throughout the city as one ecumenical church. The Roman Catholics and the Salvation Army work independently, plus there's a cluster of independent churches like the Conniburrow Free Church and Netherfield Congregation, and there are fringe sects which may or may not want to claim the label of being Christian. So I'm part of the mainstream English tradition and as far as we're concerned we're a group of four churches working together to serve this part of the city, twenty grid squares in all. It's much more difficult for these churches to group together in older, established areas. It is a trend that is welcomed by many of us, but there are some people who vociferously oppose it. Unity is not an easy option anywhere.

The Church of England policy is to have someone working in each area, rather than have a big church with a large number of staff – which goes back to what I was saying about the role of the parson. The image is *leaven*, hidden away, rather than having an enormous cathedral on the top of the hill. Each congregation is different. The new converts in our own community are all under forty. This year we presented five adults for membership and the average age was thirty or thirty-two. These are people who have had no previous Christian experience at all and who have been prompted, presumably by God, to become part of the life and work of the church.

They just turn up on Sunday and say: "I think God wants me to come to church." Then they take part in a time of preparation and are eventually accepted as members. Within every Christian group there are three categories of people. Those who are strong, confident, mature and able to sustain themselves in the knocks and hurly-burly of life, they are the workhorses. There's another group of people who have been injured in life, either mentally or physically, and most good congregations have some workhorses and some people who really need care and help to get them over their difficulties. And thirdly there are those who enjoy coming and for whom worship is valuable, but who don't contribute obviously to the life and work of the church. Who can evaluate their hidden contribution? They are part of us.

Each denomination has its own law which is a mixture of English law and church law, and as far as the Church of England is concerned only certain buildings are licensed for marriages. I could get a licence for the school but I haven't bothered because I don't think anyone would want to get married there. So if someone asks me to preside over their marriage then I'll borrow another church, usually St. Andrew's at Great Linford. Similarly for funerals. Baptisms are slightly different, they don't need a building. They are not a legal thing at all, they are a statement of faith and can take place anywhere. All you need is some water and we use a cut glass bowl. Unfortunately we broke it recently. We're using a Pyrex one at the moment!

I'm not the sort of person who carries a future pre-packed. I came here with a reasonably open mind. I'm an optimist. I assume everything will be alright. In my job it's important to listen and think and I don't really know where the institutional church is going. Many of the things the church used to do have been taken over by the state. The church's job is to come up with new ideas about what is necessary. I really hope that the community church we are building will be able to be the centre of community life, as if the community was an extended family.

One of the things that is difficult about Milton Keynes is that people haven't got grandma and grandpa around the corner and perhaps what the church has to provide is a network of families which provide that relationship with each other. The other work we have to do is the worship of God and the establishment of justice in our lives, and as Milton Keynes develops we will have more work for the Kingdom of God, to make this new city a Jerusalem, a City of Peace.