

What is the Theological Basis for Focal Ministry?

1. Introduction: Fresh Expression or Historic Tradition?

‘The Parish is dead...long live the kingdom!’ writes an anonymous reviewer of Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank’s book ‘For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions’,¹ whilst giving the book a meagre one star out of five.² For some time the needs of the parish, and the traditional understanding of the Cure of Souls has been set against new forms of ministry, particularly those that come under the banner of ‘Fresh Expressions’. This has come into even sharper focus with the rise of groups such as Save the Parish. Focal Ministry, however, stands apart from these arguments, being neither ‘fresh’ in terms of being a diversion from the historic ministry of the church, nor an ‘expression’, in terms of being ‘different to traditional church’.³ In fact, Focal Ministry is grounded in the historic Anglican understanding of the parish and its ministerial structures, enhancing its life in three particular ways: 1) emphasising the local; 2) encouraging the collegial and; 3) engaging in the missional.

Focal Ministry is a living out of the Church’s call to know, love and follow Jesus in every community of the diocese. It is grounded in ecclesiology, the theology of mission, and the vocation of the baptised. Focal Ministers are not substitutes for Incumbents, but local disciples empowered to serve within the oversight (episcope) of their parish priest and the wider diocesan structures. This section outlines the theological vision that underpins Focal Ministry.

The Tiller Report (*A Strategy for the Church’s Ministry*, 1983) anticipated many of the challenges now faced across the Church of England, particularly the need for collaborative, contextual and localised ministry. Tiller argued for a move away from the model in which the parish priest is the primary or sole minister, instead promoting shared leadership shaped by the gifts already present within the local church.⁴ Tiller’s emphasis on developing *trained local leaders* — capable of sustaining worship, discipleship and mission in multi-parish or under-resourced contexts — offers a clear theological foundation for contemporary expressions of local lay ministry, including Focal Ministry.⁵ He stressed that this does not diminish ordained ministry; priests retain sacramental, doctrinal and pastoral oversight, including responsibility for the cure of souls. Their leadership increasingly involves the ministry of episcope: enabling, training and supporting local ministers.⁶

The church’s understanding of lay ministry was developed further in the 2019 report ‘Calling All God’s People’, which particularly noted the unique nature of ordained ministry: ‘clergy are called both to specific responsibilities and to a pattern of life. It is a vocation that marks them with an enduring character’. However, it also recognised ‘that does not mean

¹ Davison, A. & Milbank A. *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (SCM, 2010)

² https://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0334043654/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews

³ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/fresh-expressions-church-england>

⁴ Tiller, J. *A Strategy for the Church’s Ministry* (London: CIO Publishing, 1983), pp. 96-106

⁵ Ibid. p. 52-58

⁶ Ibid. p. 65-70

that all the roles and tasks associated with these orders stay the same forever'. With recent changes within the life of the Church of England, this a time in which those roles and tasks are certainly in a time of change. Focal Ministry can be seen as a potential response to those changes, which both recognises the vocation and calling of the laity, whilst upholding the traditional understanding of the distinct charism and character of ordained ministry.

Focal Ministry therefore stands not as another 'fresh' idea which might be seen to undermine the historic ecclesiology of the church catholic, but as a natural outworking of this long-term theological and strategic vision within the Church of England. It has three key theological strands: Local, Collegial and Missional, which tie with the Diocese of Chichester's vision to Know, Love and Follow Jesus.

2. John Henry Newman and the Sensus Fidelium

In his key work 'On Consulting the Faithful on Matters of Doctrine' (1859), John Henry Newman argues that the whole body of the faithful, not just 'the unswerving firmness of the Holy See, Councils or Bishops'⁷, participates in the Church's grasp of the revealed truth. He cites the Arian controversy as a key example, where the faithful 'knew' the truth of the faith: 'their voice, then, is the voice of tradition'. ⁸ In the current situation the Church of England finds itself in, with clergy spread across multiple churches and communities, we might similarly say that the local laity can possess a sharper sense of how God is working in a particular community. This being so, ministry can emerge from that lived faith and understanding in a more relevant and lively way. In a sense, the local laity have their 'ear to the ground' in terms of being able to understand and communicate the needs of their local community, Focal Ministry training should then provide them with the tools to theologically reflect on this in the context of the scriptures and the theological tradition of the church. However, Newman is clear that this 'sensus fidei' must always be balanced with the traditions and beliefs of the wider church. Although Newman doesn't put it in these terms, we might frame this as 'the faith lived and held locally' and 'the faith theorised universally'. Therefore, Focal Ministry must enhance and bring to the fore the local faith, whilst also bearing witness to the universal faith.

3 Local: Knowing Jesus

"Each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church". (ARCIC III).⁹

'A Christian presence in every community'. (Church of England)¹⁰

⁷ <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/rambler/consulting.html> 3.5

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/331678/ARCICIII-Agreed-Statement-Walking-Together-21-May-2018.pdf> p. 18

¹⁰ <https://www.churchofengland.org/>

Focal Ministry begins with enabling every community to know Jesus more deeply through prayer, Scripture and worship. As it emerges from the life of the parish rather than imposing a uniform model, Focal Ministry recognises that Christ is already present and active in every Christian community. The focal minister's task is, therefore, to help people recognise and respond to this presence. This reflects the diocesan commitment that "our life must flow out of prayer and worship",¹¹ emphasising that knowing Jesus is the foundation of Christian life and mission. Focal Ministers embody this priority by modelling a life attentive to God and encouraging communities to centre their life around Christ.

David Heywood recognises that a biblical model for this might be found in 1 Thessalonians where Paul asks the faithful to 'acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you'.¹² Edward Schillebeeckx recognises that, in the first years of the early church there existed local leaders in church communities whom Paul referred to as 'fellow-workers'.¹³ As Heywood comments: 'at a later stage, these local leaders acquired titles such as elder, deacon or bishop',¹⁴ but they begin as ministering locally to church communities under the oversight of Paul.

Focal ministry is predicated upon the local parish church as the key "place of encounter with the wonder of heaven".¹⁵ Theologically, this is grounded in the conviction that the Church is the Body of Christ,¹⁶ and that the Word "became flesh and lived among us".¹⁷ David Heywood writes: 'the local church is not simply a branch of the universal church, but *is* the universal church present in each locality'.¹⁸ He goes on to recognise Leslie Newbigin's understanding that 'the local church is that part of the gathering of God entrusted with his mission to a particular locality'.¹⁹ Every congregation is thus a locus of divine encounter, a vision which Focal Ministry helps make concrete through its local presence, prayerfulness and attentiveness.

The reality of modern ministry is that the vast majority of parishes across the Church of England - around 71%²⁰ - are now part of multi-parish benefices, with a single Incumbent often ministering to multiple churches and parishes, whilst only living in one of them. The Incumbent cannot realistically be a 'local presence' in every community to which they minister, and this detachment between locality and Incumbent is only going to increase as more parishes are reorganised in the future. The local church itself must take up the baton of ministry in the local community - as it 'contains the fullness of what it is to

¹¹ https://cofechichester.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2019/11/Four_mores_final.pdf

¹² 1 Thessalonians 5:12

¹³ Schillebeeckx, E. *Ministry: A Case for Change* (SCM, 1981), p. 9

¹⁴ Heywood, D. *Focal Ministry Paper* (Unpublished: 2025), p. 2

¹⁵ Diocese of Arundel & Brighton, *The Word Who Is Life: A Pastoral Plan* (2018), pp. 4–6.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:12–27.

¹⁷ John 1:14.

¹⁸ Heywood, D. *Focal Ministry Paper* (Unpublished: 2025), p. 3

¹⁹ Newbigin, L. *The Parish Church* (Mowbray, 1988), p. 29-31

²⁰ Data from <https://www.achurchnearyou.com/>

be the church²¹ - and the Focal Minister acts as a representative and leader of that local ministry, with the Incumbent offering oversight or episcopate. This strengthens the bonds between the parish church and its people, whilst remaining faithful to the vision of the *cure of souls* across the wider church.

4 Collegial: Loving Jesus

*“All members [of the church] are called to discover, with the help of the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for the building up of the church and for the service to the world to which the church is sent”.*²² (LIMA: BEM)

*“Ordained ministry should be exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways”.*²³ (LIMA: BEM)

*“Any member of the body may share in proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, may contribute to the sacramental life of that body. The ordained ministry fulfils these functions in a representative way.”*²⁴ (LIMA: BEM)

The diocesan strategy calls the whole people of God to grow in their love for Jesus, expressed in deepened discipleship and transformed lives.²⁵ Focal Ministry contributes to this by nurturing the faith, confidence and maturity of local congregations.

Focal Ministers help people grow in love for Christ by encouraging practices of daily prayer, Scripture engagement, small-group fellowship, and pastoral care shaped by Christ’s commandment to love one another. This aligns with *The Word Who is Life*, which emphasises forming “disciples” who are “closely conformed to Christ” who express their identity in “the service of Christ and of our brothers and sisters”.²⁶

The Eucharist, as the sacrament of Christ’s self-giving love, remains central to Christian formation. The Church teaches that it is “the source and summit of the Christian life”²⁷ and it is vital that Focal Ministry supports communities in remaining centred on this sacramental expression of divine love. By helping facilitate Eucharistic life and enabling communities to gather faithfully around the Lord in the sacrament, Focal Ministers strengthen the Church’s love for Jesus.

Focal Ministry does not replace existing priestly ministry in parish but depends on it, and allows priests and deacons to live out their calling more fully. The ministry of episcopate

²¹ <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/331678/ARCICIII-Agreed-Statement-Walking-Together-21-May-2018.pdf> p. 18

²² https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/102580/lima_document.pdf, p. 17

²³ Ibid. p. 23

²⁴ Ibid. p. 19

²⁵ https://cofechichester.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2019/11/Four_mores_final.pdf

²⁶ Diocese of Arundel & Brighton, *The Word Who Is Life: A Pastoral Plan* (2018), p. 4

²⁷ https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

— pastoral, sacramental and missional oversight — remains the responsibility of the Incumbent. This includes safeguarding, doctrine, celebrating the sacraments, coordinating mission, and exercising the *cure of souls*. Focal Ministers serve within the priest's cure of souls, not alongside or outside it. They extend the priest's pastoral presence, foster continuity of worship, and support the building up of the Body of Christ. This model reflects the early Church pattern in which apostles (oversight) and local ministers (presence) worked together for the flourishing of the community.

5 Missional: Following Jesus

“These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and...carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world”²⁸ (LUMEN GENTIUM)

Finally, the diocesan vision calls us not only to know and love Jesus, but to follow Him into the world. Following Jesus involves participating in His mission and responding to His call to serve the communities in which we live.

Focal Ministers help churches follow Jesus by encouraging outward-looking mission and hospitality, recognising the needs of the parish, empowering the gifts of the laity, and offering consistent, incarnational presence where clergy cannot always be physically present. Their ministry reflects the Church's vocation to participate in the *Missio Dei*: the mission of God in the world.

A biblical model for this is the sending of the seventy-two (Luke 10), whom Jesus sends “ahead of him to every town and place where he intended to go”. Their mission is relational, local and preparatory — precisely the pattern seen in Focal Ministry. They prepare the ground for people to encounter Christ.

Romans 16 provides another early example, where Paul commends local leaders such as Phoebe, Priscilla and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia. These individuals sustain the life, mission and pastoral care of local gatherings while remaining under Paul's apostolic oversight. Focal Ministers mirror this early Christian pattern of local leadership supported by wider oversight.

David Heywood notes that when David Hope became Bishop of London, he introduced a new job description for clergy, who were now primarily to be ‘the leader in mission and the enabler of other people's ministries’.²⁹ This raises the question of the role of Incumbents in relation of the missional life of the parish: are they primarily missioners or pastors? If the former, this suggests the space for Focal Ministers to fulfil some aspects of a latter, whilst recognising that certain sacramental aspects of pastoral ministry remain reserved for those who are ordained. Heywood recognises the work of missionaries such as Henry Venn and Roland Allen as a model for this: ‘for Venn, the role of the missionary was to plant but not to pastor the church. The church was to become self-sustaining, which required local, indigenous leadership’.³⁰

²⁸ https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. Chapter 4. Paragraph 31

²⁹ Heywood, D. *Focal Ministry Paper* (Unpublished: 2025), p. 1

³⁰ Ibid. p. 3

Following Jesus involves discerning where God is at work and joining in. Focal Ministers enable parishes to focus on mission, helping communities follow Christ in acts of proclamation, service, justice and hospitality.

6 Conclusion: Living the Mystery of Faith - What is a Parish Priest For?

The phrase ‘the Mystery of Faith’ originates from 1 Timothy 3:9 in a description of the attributes Bishops or Overseers (ἐπίσκοπος) and Deacons (διάκονος) need to possess. It also sets out a clear sense, for Paul, of role within the local church: overseer and minister. This is a pattern for ministry which is identified for the local, explicitly collegial and engaged in the missional. How does modern ministry within the Church of England, and more specifically Focal Ministry, fit within this model?

The Book of Common Prayer outlines three main tasks for Priests to be engaged in: teaching,³¹ ministering the sacraments, and being ‘diligent in prayers, and in the reading of scriptures’. Common Worship expands this to include making ‘the love of Christ known’, having care ‘for those in need’ and working ‘with your fellow servants in the Gospel’. Placed together we can identify six main tasks for Priests: 1) praying and reading scripture; 2) teaching the faithful; 3) ministering the sacraments; 4) mission;³² 5) pastoral care; 6) building ministerial teams.³³ Yet, when we encounter the list of roles that an Incumbent engages in today within the Church of England it begins to look quite different: buildings manager, local leader, social worker, churchyard administrator, chair of meetings, children’s entertainer, sacristan, group facilitator, conflict manager, and so on. Many of these are taken on by the Incumbent simply due to the lack of anyone in the parish who is trained and available to do them.

The recent ‘Living Ministry’ study titled ‘Lord for the Years’ highlights that 29% of clergy show signs of depression and 40% say they feel isolated. It explicitly highlights that ‘administration is the cause of most workload stress, partly as a distraction from vocation’.³⁴ The research suggests that allowing clergy to focus more explicitly on those roles they were called to as part of their Priestly vocation, identified in the BCP and Common Worship above, would increase their wellbeing and decrease their stress.

Focal Ministry supports clergy wellbeing in two interlinked ways. Firstly, it decreases isolation by providing a ‘ministerial companion’ to share in the burdens and joys of the parish. In order for this to be fruitful, training must be in place for Incumbents to be ready to work more collegially.³⁵ Secondly, a Focal Minister can take on certain roles that have fallen to Incumbents but *are not part of their priestly vocation*. This allows Incumbents to rediscover their original calling and recommit themselves to the tasks set before them, leading to a higher sense of satisfaction and wellbeing.

³¹ ‘Teach the people committed to your cure’

³² ‘Making the love of Christ known’.

³³ ‘Working with your fellow servants in the Gospel’.

³⁴ Various authors, *Lord for the Years: Clergy Wellbeing 2017-2025* (2025), <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/living-ministry-wave-5-panel-survey-report-lord-for-the-years.pdf>, p. 5

³⁵ This will be explored in the training section of the paper.

Therefore, the Diocesan strap-line ‘the Mystery of Faith’ needs to be understood in its original context in 1 Timothy, which seeks to elucidate what it means to minister in the church. Focal Ministry is a central part of this vision, allowing Incumbents to rediscover what it means to live out their vocation in the modern church. Focal Ministry thus thereby a ‘resource for the Incumbent’ but also ‘a resource for the parish’:

Knowing Jesus - fostering prayerful, worshipping communities that serve the local.

Loving Jesus - nurturing discipleship and more collegial ways of ministering.

Following Jesus - enabling local mission, witness and service.

Thus, Focal Ministry is a theological and practical outworking of the diocesan call to *know, love and follow Jesus*. It enables every parish to live faithfully as the Body of Christ, attentive to His presence, shaped by His love, and active in His mission.