

LOCAL ARRANGEMENTS

I received my Note to Preach – the first step on the path to become a Local Preacher – almost exactly sixty years ago. At my first service, at Minster on the Isle of Sheppey in 1962, I did everything apart from preach the sermon, and I mean Everything! (Preachers on Note are dealt with more gently now, I'm glad to say). So, as a 17-year-old schoolboy, I stood up in my three-piece suit and was responsible for the Call to Worship, announcing the hymns I had chosen, leading the prayers (always extempore), reading the lessons (always AV/King James Version, though the New English Bible New Testament had been published not long before) and even giving the church notices!

Earlier this year I led a service in a church in our Circuit. I say 'led', but in fact most of the service was led by a newly appointed Worship Leader, chosen and appointed by the local church and trained by the Circuit, who, following the welcome by the duty steward, announced hymns and led the opening prayers (written or selected by herself) and saw the service through to its conclusion. All lessons were read and the Thanksgiving and Intercessions led (beautifully) by other members of the congregation. Rather like the dormouse at the tea party in *Alice in Wonderland* (but less mad, I hope) I emerged from time to time, to thank the congregation for their welcome (I could hardly welcome them to their own chapel), preach and announce the Blessing.

Most churches I know are somewhere between those two extremes. The preacher is still expected to choose hymns and readings and lead the service (and preach, of course) but readers are usually available, and there may be someone willing to lead the Intercessions: perhaps an accredited Worship Leader; and both the Welcome and Notices are given by a steward.

What set me thinking along these lines? It was the increasing number of services on the plan where the preacher's name is replaced by the letters 'LA' – standing for Local Arrangement. I rather think that this is seen by some as second-best: there is no preacher available and only an accredited preacher is allowed to preach a sermon (though some churches cheat, and use a local preacher or supernumerary minister who happens to be free on the day: fair enough, I suppose). But is an LA really second-best? I have heard of some beautifully crafted LA services led by members of the local congregation without the help of a Local Preacher: no sermon, but there are other ways of responding to the Word of God: through discussion, dialogue, drama, poetry, music, even film; or quite simply silent contemplation (assuming we can get Methodists to stop talking...).

So, is an LA an excuse to go off and visit the family, since there won't be a 'proper' service led by a minister or local preacher? Or is it a reminder that worship is the work of the people – which is what the word 'liturgy' really means? The new Secretary of the Methodist Church's Faith and Order Committee is the Revd Mark Rowland. He recently said this: 'I want preachers and ministers to believe that we are at churches to assist in worship more than we are to lead it.' He quotes the late Revd Dr Gordon Wakefield: '[the whole congregation] are the celebrants, not the minister alone who presides. It has been suggested that he – or she – is more like the producer of a play than the chief actor.'

Blessings,

Peter