

“More Tea, Vicar?”

The book of Proverbs tells us to “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” (Proverbs 3:5). In November 2018 I put my trust fully into God’s hands, as I joined others at a diocesan vocations day. Without realising it at the time, I was starting my journey to ordained ministry.

The emotions that come with such a journey are intense, varied and at times confusing, especially as it’s one that not many know about until the right decisions and choices have been made, trusting in God is the only way to achieve this; you truly are in His hands. As Jesus said, “Trust in God still, and trust in me” (John 14:1).

Rightly so the vocational calling to ordained ministry is a strict process, and as the Church of England Ordinal states: “You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God.

The first step for me once I realised that God might just be calling me was to speak with the Revd. Canon Pamela Ive who is the DDO (Diocesan Director of Ordinands) at the Diocese of Rochester who arranged for me to meet with a Vocations officer. I spent time over the next few months talking through my life and my faith with the Revd. Will North and attending his church in Barming. During this time, I was asked to explain why I felt God was calling me. How do you answer that question? I had always wondered when people had said that they heard God speaking to them how they knew, and could that possibly happen. I admit now I wasn’t totally sure, however I can genuinely say that sitting there that Saturday afternoon in November 2018, I realised that was exactly what had happened: God had been speaking to me for a long time, it just took until that exact moment for me to realise that’s what it was. And the final question I was asked on the form that day, “What did I feel I was being called to do?” I found myself ticking the box for ordained ministry - in those few moments so much of my life made more sense than it ever had.

In January 2019 I was recommended to move forward to the next stage, which was to meet with a ADDO (Assistant Director of Ordinands) for me this would be Revd Tim Hatwell in Ightham (a name worth googling if you’re a fan of the film Love Actually!), I spent the following few months again discussing my faith, as well as the “five guiding principles” of the Church of England, and what it truly means to be ordained. Later on in the year, I was recommended to go to a BAP (Bishops Advisory Panel) and this is when the journey got very real!

The BAP process is very intense and to pass the educational part I needed to show that I was capable of training at a degree level, so in September 2019 I headed off to college, part time at St. Augustine’s College of Theology, a very scary part of the journey for someone who has been working since the day after leaving school, and having not set foot in a classroom for over 25 years! Again, my life was very much in God’s hands.

In February 2020 I set off for Ely in Cambridge, where seven strangers and I would spend time together, along with four advisors to establish if ordained ministry was really what God was calling us to. Before attending the BAP, references were needed from Fr. Paul, a lay person from our church, my employer, so obviously that was hard as I am self-employed, so this fell to one of my customers and from my College, as well as lots of paperwork from my Vocations Officer, ADDO and myself, including lots of questionnaires about my life, my work, my family, my friends and importantly my faith and also a 500 word written reflection.

Sitting in my room waiting for our welcome meeting I reflected on my life, the good and the bad, the sad and the happy, I thought about where I started my life journey with my Mum, Dad and brothers, the teenage me, the twenty and thirty-something me, and the cancer survivor me, and after a few tears, both for the happy and sad memories, I asked God to do something he has been doing my whole life, to guide me through this next phase, and that whatever He was calling me for, I would follow and trust in Him.

Those following days were a mixture of more emotions than I can explain, our lives were laid bare. The first evening we had a personal inventory test based on the criteria for selection, where we had to answer a multitude of questions in a limited amount of time, then we received our instructions about the pastoral letter. All I can say about this moment was one of group left immediately to head to his room, and the remaining seven of us sat in silence for half an hour staring at a piece of paper.

We had two days to reply to the letter and this would become a large part of our assessment. We then, along with our assessors shared supper together; all mealtimes were shared as a group, where we had to ensure we moved around each meal and got to speak to all the assessors in turn. Later that first evening we shared in compline (night prayer) together before heading off to our rooms for bed, ready for a full day ahead.

The following two days consisted of a Vocational, a Pastoral and an Educational interview, with each person leaving each interview wide eyed and exhausted. And then the part I was most worried about, we had to give a presentation based on one of the criteria for selection. Firstly you give your timed presentation, then you facilitate and participate in a group discussion, and then end with summarising what had been discussed, this is done for all eight candidates and it was as important to join in the discussions for everyone both for their experience, and for yours as all the time we were being watched and assessed for our contributions.

The simple task of picking who went first was chosen by which chair you sat on and which playing card you received. As I picked up my card and saw the ace I really hoped it was ace high, but no, that wasn't the way it worked, and I was up first! My presentation title was based on Criterion F - Leadership and Collaboration: The Youth in our Church. I took a deep breath, smiled and in that moment my fears were unfounded, the whole presentation went well, and I have the amazing youth in our church and benefice to thank for that, as it seems when I talk about them and what we have achieved and what we do, my face lights up and the enthusiasm overflows.

Each night I went to bed exhausted, but happy to be where I was. The mornings and evenings were filled with worship, and with a very special ashing service on Ash Wednesday (and yes we did get pancakes the evening before!). Worship was just myself, and the eleven others, seven of whom were going through the same emotions as I was. I was also very conscious of the immense pressure on the four advisors as it was down to them to prayerfully determine if they thought God was truly calling us for ordained ministry, what a weight to bear!

I returned home to Yalding for what was to become a long few days of waiting, but on a calm Thursday afternoon, I answered a call from Bishop James of Rochester who asked me if I would train for ordained ministry. I'm sure I managed to get the words "yes please" out somewhere in between thanking him and resisting the urge to cry and shout in excitement - that came in the following moments where I shared my news with my Mum, my family and friends. And then, in true Yalding style, the rain came down, I put on my flood wardens high viz, and I continued on the path God has set for me, to be there for others, and to help and support those in need.

The decisions I have since made have been extremely big, and have been taken in discussion with my family, with my friends, with Fr Paul, and in prayer with God. I know my calling will mean leaving Yalding one day, something I never thought I would do. It will also mean giving up my business, DizRat, which I have run for nearly twenty years, and it will mean studying full-time, and forfeiting spending time with those I love. Some say this is a sacrifice, but I genuinely see this as a privilege. I will get to walk alongside people during their most emotional, important times of their lives, I will be able to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, and the stories of the Bible, and eventually I will have the honour of sharing the Lord's Supper with His people in Holy Communion. what a privilege that will be!

So, what's next for me, as I sit in my study reflecting on this journey? I am about to return to college, I am about to stand down from an extended reign as churchwarden, and I have now become an ordinand in God's Church. My days and weeks will now consist of attending classes, lectures, and language studies, essay writing, as well as shadowing Fr Paul and Revd. Lisa to build on what I have learnt as a churchwarden. I will then head to a placement in another parish, and then a curacy in yet another parish, with the whole process lasting several years with my ordination in the middle, firstly as a Deacon and then as a Priest. I will learn to study the Bible, how to preach, to take weddings, baptisms, and funerals, but one thing for sure is that as well as taking myself through this journey, I will be taking a little bit of Yalding and our Benefice with me wherever I go.

"My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me."(John 10:37) Amen.

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