



Giles Fraser

Too much religion is bad for your faith

LAST SUNDAY morning, I took my daughter swimming. I was not on the rota for duty in church, and I did go to the eucharist in the evening. None the less, I felt guilty. This was the first time in years that I had not been to church on a Sunday morning, and it felt weird. But it did me good.

"Too much religion is bad for your faith." These are wise words I once heard from the college principal at Cuddesdon many moons ago. He was right. It is all too easy for those of us who are involved day by day in the work of the Church to become obsessed by the details and the delivery, and to neglect the big picture.

This is why we professional religious types — especially clergy and those poor souls who are attracted to the work of church committees — get all steamed up about things that are, in the great scheme of things, unimportant: what you wear to say mass, what an obscure verse of scripture means, the latest nonsense from GAFCON (News, Comment, 25 January).

Faith is supposed to broaden horizons. To claim a faith in God is to see yourself and the world from within the context of one who created the stars and the sky, the one who is eternal and everlasting. To be a Christian is thus to view things with a wide-angled lens. Yet too many of us are caught up in minutiae, focusing ever more narrowly on what are little more than technicalities. This is why too much religion is bad for your faith. Often, you have to step away a little to see it.

Most of my fellow Sunday morning swimmers have no interest in church. What has the 10 a.m. service to offer these people that is more important than the joy of larking around with their kids in the pool? Of course, I think it has a great deal to offer. Jesus promised life in all its fullness.

The problem is that many churches do not appear even to attempt to live out that promise. I wager that the vast majority of business conducted in most PCCs relates more to ecclesiastical house-keeping than the deeper point of the Church. Jesus makes big, bold, shocking claims. We squeak like a bat — and I hate to say this, but it is true — liberals especially.

Large organisations readily come to see their own internal workings as being what they are all about. The reason churches so often become dull is that they confuse the infrastructure of the church with its purpose. This sort of church may be of interest to ecclesiological anoraks, but it won't get people out of the pool and on to their knees. When the Kingdom comes in great power and glory, no one is going to care if anybody took the minutes.

The Revd Dr Giles Fraser is Team Rector of Putney.

Don't lose your pastoral heart

Clerics urgently need to recover their interest in people, says James Woodward

I OVERHEARD a clerical colleague respond recently to a parishioner's request to visit a non-churchgoing member of the parish: "Visiting — parish visiting? That's old hat these days."

This need and the response may fill us with concern, guilt, agreement, or bemusement. Time is precious, and it is impossible to meet everyone's expectations. It reminded me of a hospital chaplain who could not leave the building until he had visited every bed on the rota of wards for that day. I wondered whether the only need he was meeting was his own.

All of this raises important questions about the management of time, but there is also something else going on. We need to understand how we choose to exercise our ministry, and what perspectives shape the choices we make.

I believe the Church is losing its pastoral heart. We have ceased to invest in our interest in those around us and the richness of their lived experience. We prefer paper to people, computers to conversations: we now seek to manage our parishes rather than to pastor them.

We imagine that an organised parish is alive and ready to take risks, but the communities and individuals who are the subject of our strategies are all too often feeling ignored on a deeper level. We are retreating into a carefully planned irrelevance — absorbed by a bureaucracy that distracts us from the time-consuming task of interpersonal care. We are failing to engage with people for their own sake.

OUR THEOLOGY can be enriched if we open ourselves up to people, their work and values, their hopes and anxieties. We can do this only if we make a choice to listen: to attempt to connect beyond the safety zone of our inward-looking religious worlds. I am constantly amazed at people's preparedness to open up the spiritual fabric of their life; to talk theology; to

Use the opportunity: baptisms, weddings, and funerals can be good places to listen to people

ask questions, if they are given time and attention on their own territory.

Many of these encounters emerge from conducting occasional offices with care. The mother arranging a baptism is also a stressed accountant worried about her work and how this balances with the responsibilities of motherhood; she is a spiritual person wanting to know more about how prayer works. The grandparents at a baptism party are anxious about what kind of world their little ones will grow up in. After the funeral of a younger person, gathering in the pub, a stranger is kind enough to ask: "Where has all that left your head, vicar? Do you fancy a pint?"

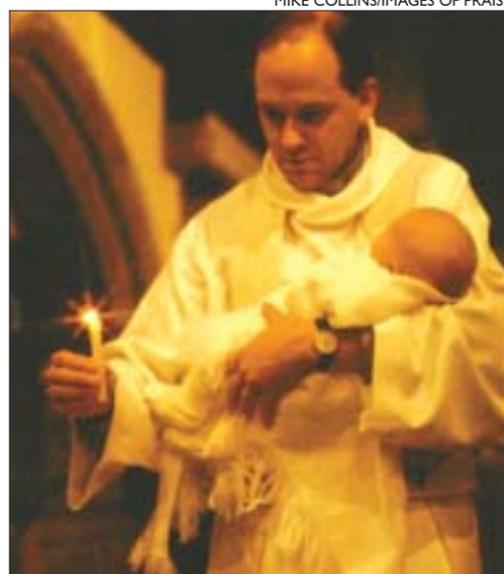
Beyond the meetings, the forms, and ministerial-appraisal sessions are the countless opportunities to engage. A card, a phone call, an invitation for a drink, a visit — these are the lifeblood of hearts that can be recreated through a commitment to pastoral care.

IF WE BELIEVED that this task was important, then we would find time

for it. I am not arguing for compulsive activity. Being over-busy (look how important I am) or tired (looking after others can be a substitute for caring for ourselves) is a characteristic of the clergy today. We hardly convey life in all its fullness because we cannot stand still long enough to look.

We are afraid of allowing the experience of others to change us. As members of the clergy, we can learn from artists: the artist goes deep into himself or herself to create. Let others and their stories set our theological agendas, as we move inwards and outwards towards a different set of priorities for the gospel.

If this resonates with you, then the challenge must be shared with colleagues in the hierarchy — those who labour under the conviction that they oversee. In our ecclesiastical self-preoccupation, we need to look outwards. We shall need to give a higher priority to the occasional offices and the opportunities they give us to connect. Let those on the outside help us to understand our



MIKE COLLINS/IMAGES OF PRAISE

ministry with a greater sense of realism.

We need to create time to meet people on their ground. When was the last time we accompanied a parishioner to the workplace, listening to the realities of the office, hospital, farm, or factory? We should place ourselves in places where we can meet people: the pub, community hall, and school playground all offer the chance to establish friendships. Let us see time spent with people not as administration-time wasted, but people-time wisely spent.

This might mean reordering our use of time to create space for a wider range of pastoral encounters. It might mean that we lead by example, so that others in our church community can have the courage to be pastoral — opening up much of what is a closed group to more challenging conversations about life and God.

We need to set ourselves a feasible target for visiting, and stick to it. Even one quality visit a week will transform the relationship with scores of people in a year. Don't forget that they love a phone call or a postcard, too.

All of this needs to be put into the context of collaboration with the whole people of God, where we release the potential of others, as we work together for the common good — sharing the joyful task of pastoral care with lay people, and letting them set the agenda for care.

The many diocesan schemes to train lay people to work with the clergy in visiting and care are a great ministerial innovation. But, too often, these schemes make clergy volunteer-managers rather than pastors, because among the clergy there is a deep confusion about the priest's identity and pastoral task. One of the ways through this is to recover the art of visiting, and so rediscover for ourselves that which is being lost: a pastoral heart.

The Revd Dr James Woodward is Vicar of St Mary's, Temple Balsall, in the diocese of Birmingham.

Spread the money and power



DO NOT get between the hippos and the water, the sign said. It was the only danger around. We had gone to see the vast flocks of flamingos that covered the lake like a shimmering pink haze. Naivasha was a pretty little lakeside town.

This week has turned it from a tourist town into a

no-go area, a terrible development for a country where tourism is the top earner of foreign exchange, but more terrible for the hundreds of people who have been hacked to death with machetes, pulled from their cars by mobs and stoned, or burned alive as they took refuge in buildings.

The post-election violence in Kenya has taken a disturbing new turn, as a tribal polarisation between the Kikuyu (20 per cent of the population) and Luo (13 per cent) has deepened to a low that Kenyans have not seen before. It all gives further ammunition to the prophets of despair in the West who dismiss Africa as un governable. The *Daily Mail* has even published photos of vigilantes armed with bows and arrows, reinforcing the subliminal message that these people are primitives, not long out of living in trees.

It is tempting to lose patience with Africa, especially when violence comes to a country long

Kenyans need to challenge their political inequalities, says Paul Vallely

hailed as the most politically stable in the region. We all have what a friend of mine calls "the *Daily Mail* within", from which our basest atavistic reactions bubble before they are dissipated by our reason. It is there in the other media, too — hence the wildly off-beam comparison of Kenya to Rwanda. Things are terrible in Kenya, but this is not a small group mobilising a community and state institutions, using state resources, to exterminate an entire community.

Kenya has long had what the locals call "land clashes", flaring up around election time. It happened in 1993, 1997, and 2002. The cause is the lack of fertile land for ordinary people, though frustration is commonly expressed through ethnicity or tribe.

This is not rocket science. Three years ago, Graça Machel, in a report interrogating the country's governance under the African Peer Review Mechanism, suggested that Kenya was sitting on a political time bomb: "Kenya has much strength that mitigates against the outbreak of mass violence, but it also exhibits many of the factors that have been markers of civil strife elsewhere, such as strong ethnic

divisions, socio-economic disparities, poverty, and endemic corruption."

It is the culture from which this disturbing violence erupts that does not disturb us sufficiently. Kenya is far from Africa's poorest nation, but 60 per cent of its people live on less than \$1 a day. The strong economic growth in Kenya in recent years has not filtered down to them, but has remained with the "Mount Kenya Mafia" of politicians and their business cronies (Comment, 11 January).

Ordinary people lack not just economic affluence, but are deprived of the education that would enable them to see that the small solidarity of tribalism offers no solution to problems that go far wider. They need to press for change to a system where the President appoints the electoral commission and the judges that hear electoral petitions; or where Nairobi's inner circle can manipulate who gets elected to parliament in most of central Kenya; or where politicians who had previously tried to minimise ethnic conflict this time mobilised their supporters along tribal lines.

The two men who both claim that they won the disputed election are now prisoners of their respective political positions. The time has now come for them, like their supporters, to abandon their sense of grievance, and look to a solution that is not driven by fear and anger. If they cannot, they should both go.

Paul Vallely is a co-author of the report of the Commission for Africa (2005).