

St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme 13. A reflection on transitions

Helen Averill, who runs the Clergy Transitions Service, reflects on change and transition in relation to the effect of the Covid pandemic and the process of adjustment and gradual moving forward.

Transition

Noun:

the process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another.

Verb:

undergo or cause to undergo a process or period of transition.

We have all experienced a lot of change in the last four months. Those who have suffered the loss of a loved one or damage to their own health will be grieving; this is a natural and ongoing response to loss. Those who have come through so far without such painful personal experience are still likely to have to deal with the challenges of a reduced economy, gaps or delays in education, the lack of family care structures, or jobs, to name but a few.

Many people think of change like standing, metaphorically, at a cliff face and, depending on your viewpoint, there is either a long way down or a steep climb up - either way it is daunting. Transition is defined as the process we go through in order to bring about, or respond to, change. By moving consciously through the transition process, we are able to integrate change into our lives and our sense of self.

The Clergy Transition Service I work with uses images of crossroads, of steps, of a path through the woods or a gently flowing river to convey the idea of a journey or a period of changing from one state to another. All of these pictures have an element of moving gently and naturally, so that it becomes easier to think about bringing about change.

Reacting to change

Understandably, when we experience sudden change forced upon us we can feel fearful, anxious and unhappy. We might look for certainty and try to hang onto the things or routines that are familiar. In the first few weeks of working from home during lockdown I discovered that following the same work schedule and wearing my 'work' clothes helped me to be much more settled and my productivity improved. This is an acceptable strategy as long as it is not so overused that it becomes an obstacle to change.

An important step in going through a transition is to keep a focus on what you can do and what you can have a say in. Stephen Covey, writing in 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People', describes a model consisting of concentric circles: the largest contains all our concerns, within that is a second smaller circle containing those over which we can exercise some influence; smaller still within that is a circle holding all those concerns which are in our direct control. His advice is to put our energies into concerns in our circle of control and into expanding our circle of influence and to let go of anything outside that.

Luke 12:25 reminds us: 'Who of you by worrying can add a single minute to your life.' Some of the advice for people who became very anxious about the pandemic was to limit their consumption of news and media stories. Numbers and statistics and graphs are beyond our control. The key is to focus on doing what we can do and on what we can influence.

If nothing else seems possible then we can focus on our own internal transition. Asking '*What is my response? How will I act in this situation?*' gives us power over our reactions. We can make choices, maybe not about what happens, but about what we think and feel in response to what happens.

This is described as 'the last of the human freedoms' by Viktor Frankl in his book 'Man's Search for Meaning'.

Preparing for change

Most people don't like change and, as a result, the decision is often only made late - when they feel burnt out and despondent. Deciding to make a transition earlier gives more opportunities and involves less trauma. Being sensitive to when it is right to start planning a new future requires proactivity and positivity. When there is the opportunity it is helpful to take a step back and think carefully about our values and beliefs, our hopes for the future, and what motivates and interests us.

In preparing for change it is a good idea to think about what we have to take with us in our travel bag. What strengths, skills and talents do I have? Understanding who we are and what our experience and training have kitted us out to do is important; so too is understanding what we would be interested to learn and develop.

Sometimes the transition starts before we can see the end result. We don't know how long the process will take or what the journey will demand of us. Getting married or becoming a parent for the first time is a real step into the personal unknown; changing our role is stretching; discerning a vocation and then training for ordination can be a long and arduous transition - but people make those decisions every day. We are not always certain of the future but there is a conviction that there is something better in that future.

This series of reflections provided by St Luke's contains many inspirational ideas and tools to support the transition we are all going through; building up mental, physical and spiritual resources to help us face the future. Developing our resilience is key, so that we are not so fearful of the unknown, but rather are sure that we can face whatever comes and will do our best to shape what might be.

Seeking support in our transition

Embarking on a transition can be daunting. Having resources to help on the way is vital; family and friends, a spiritual director, a coach, a mentor and, if appropriate, services like the Clergy Transitions Service are all good options. Everyone needs people encouraging them and cheering them on. (If you need evidence of that just look at some of the lacklustre sporting fixtures we have seen recently!). Whatever transition we face we can make sure we are supported and equipped to deal with whatever the journey brings. Wherever we go we take ourselves with us. What that means, who we are, is up to us: we are not made of rock, we are flexible and we can learn and evolve throughout our lives.

I am reading a biography of Clement Atlee, Prime Minister after Churchill in 1945; a quiet man, thoughtful and sometimes described as being rather grey and ordinary next to his more flamboyant predecessor. Yet it was his government that was responsible for the development of the Welfare State and the founding of the NHS 72 years ago. Times were 'very grim' after the Second World War but there was a real desire to grasp the opportunity of a new start. Their experiences may have been defining, but they were not limiting.

As we transition to a future that we don't yet know, spending time reflecting on our strengths, what matters to us, and what we want to be different will help us. We need to focus on what will carry us forward on the journey, what direction we want to choose; and be ready to call on others for their support.

The Clergy Transitions Service offers free, confidential, individual support for clergy who feel that they are at a vocational crossroads, or who would like help in reflecting on their current and future ministry. For more information, see <https://www.churchofengland.org/clergytransitions> or email helen.averill@churchofengland.org

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact either the person in your diocese responsible for clergy wellbeing or St Luke's via its website or on [020 7898 1700](tel:02078981700).