

The Anglican Communion likes a good argument. I see that as no more than a natural consequence of our being both a broad church and one full of people who are passionate about their faith. But I must admit I'm getting a little bored with the particular arguments that have been going the rounds over the last decade or so. So I thought I'd take today as an opportunity for me to start a new one. Let's see if we can give Anglicanism something else to fight about.

My first thought was to try to revive the centuries' old question of how many sacraments Anglicans believe there are. The debate still splutters along in the more remote corners of the internet, and as a mathematician I was drawn to the fact that it's a row about numbers. But it's a bit stale, and it doesn't really fit in with the theme of today. Then came the moment of inspiration. Many of you have come to this service to replenish the stocks of oil that you will use in your ministry over the next twelve months. Members of the congregation will bring forward the new supplies in a few minutes, and then Bishop John will bless them. But why only three holy oils; surely as with sacraments there must be a case to expand it to seven? So, brothers and sisters let me offer you four new holy oils, each with a vital part to play in the ministry of bishops, priests and deacons and maybe of others too. And for those lay members of our churches here today, please look to find your own place, as colleagues of your clergy, to whom, by tradition, these words are first and most directly addressed.

The oil of lubrication (bottle of WD 40))

If the model of the priest as the person who does everything was once the pattern in the Church of England (and I have my doubts) it obviously won't do now. Clergy work with and alongside lay people in a range of ministerial and missional tasks. Nor is it any longer the case that the individual in Holy Orders is the best one to lead on every issue. The present and projected future numbers of stipendiary ministers make it clear that the ordained role can continue to be distinctive, but it will have to be different. In proposing this new holy oil I'm inviting you to see an essential part of that role as being the lubricant in the system. The priest or deacon oils the wheels of the parish, making sure that things are running as smoothly as possible, freeing up bits of the mechanism that have got jammed, reducing the incidence and the impact of friction, getting into the smallest cracks in the social fabric. It's a role exercised both within the gathered congregation and out in the wider parish. The clergyperson is well-placed to hold the trust of the different groups and interests that make up the local community. One project I set up in Yorkshire required three local authority departments to cooperate. They said to me, "We would never have trusted each other enough to do it ourselves, but we all trusted you". That may be the best compliment I've ever been paid. Sometimes getting one part of the machine running will put strain on another. On other occasions taking the decisions that are needed will cause stress between individuals or groups. Be there as oil, even when you are the one who has thrown the grit into the system in the first place.

The oil of seasoning (bottle of extra virgin olive oil)

I'm a relatively late convert to oil-based dressings. Having left behind me both the bottles of Heinz Salad Cream of my childhood, and a brief flirtation with Hellman's Mayonnaise in later years, I've tended to go for the more exotic species of lettuce but to eat it plain. Only recently have I found that a good dressing can make a difference. It brings out the flavours inherent in the food and then adds a bit of an edge. One of the jibes that is still occasionally raised against Anglican leaders and Anglican congregations is that we are "the bland leading the bland". Our task as ministers is to find the hidden flavours in our congregation and to let some of them come to the fore so that they can make what we offer attractive to those who haven't simply grown up on it. As a child I used to cover any food I didn't relish with a huge dollop of HP sauce, it had the great virtue of being able to overpower any inherent taste in what I was eating with its own. That's not what I'm urging upon you; we probably all know stories of clergy who have gone into a benefice determined to remake it in their own image. It's a course of action that neither respects the faith of those present nor is likely to succeed at a practical level – unless the vicar manages to drive out the original congregation and replace it with a new one in fairly rapid time. One of my most moving periods of ministry was concerned with leading a church that was at first simply "Anglican low" into an experience of charismatic evangelical renewal that was somewhat beyond my own spiritual home but was clearly what the Holy Spirit was equipping people for. And then do add that extra edge. The best dressing contains at least an element of mustard or vinegar; something to stimulate the jaded palate. Offer just a little of an unexpected flavour. When the group chaired by Professor Michael Taylor suggested one of our six underpinning themes for the diocese should be to "rid the world of poverty" we were deliberately being challenged to something far beyond our capabilities, but where the very impossibility of the task gives us the added edge to do no less than our best.

The oil of propulsion (Church Commissioners' Fuel Card)

This is the most valuable symbol of oil I can show you today. It allows the bearer to charge unlimited quantities of diesel to the Church Commissioners for England. Via the internal combustion engine, and at least until the earth's supplies run out, oil creates movement. It gets us from one place to another and it gets us there faster than we could manage without it. We take it for granted and yet as soon as there is any remote threat to its supply we queue outside filling stations until we have emptied them of all their remaining stock. The task of the clergy is to help churches to move. To get from where you are now to where you believe God is calling you to be. There's a lot of inertia in the Church of England's structures and processes and there are always those who will seek to ensure that the handbrake remains firmly on. I suspect that if the average parish were a motor car the mpg would not be particularly competitive. In short, if the clergy are not striving to keep the thing moving most churches would stay exactly where they are. As the scatological version of the old hymn puts it, "Like a mighty tortoise moves the church of God. Brothers we are treading where we've always trod"; or read TS Eliot's poem "The Hippopotamus" for an even less encouraging comparison. For many of us the challenge at present is encapsulated in our three diocesan priorities; we need to move into

a deeper spirituality and an excellence in worship and we need to move out in evangelism to our communities. What in your parish or chaplaincy needs an injection of fuel? How can you ensure that you are topped enough yourself in order to be able to supply it?

The oil of protection (E45 cream)

I think this will be the first time I've ever shared a beauty or cosmetic tip with you. It will probably also be the last as I've only got the one. After 30 or so years of continuous testing I can recommend E45 cream as the perfect foot protector for those who reject shoes and socks. This simple, paraffin based product (my daughter assures me that paraffin is a type of oil) stops hardening of the skin and prevents painful cracking, especially in the winter. Oil protects. It may be deeply old fashioned, but one of the key roles of the ordained ministry is to protect God's people. In our initiation services we ask of candidates that they affirm their renunciation of evil, of sin and of the devil. Whenever we ask anyone to make promises we take upon ourselves a moral duty to play what part is proper to us in helping them to keep their vows. This isn't the moment to launch into a great list of all the things that assail God's people, but rest assured there will always be something in all of our lives. As clergy we absolve and we bless, but we also teach and preach. We hear confessions and we offer guidance. We speak out, as the churches in Dudley are doing at this very specific time, against evils such as racism and prejudice. We demonstrate by the way we live our lives that our trust is in a God who is stronger than all that would prevail against us.

Endpiece

As I've said before, Holy Week is not lacking in solemnity, and at this service we have the opportunity, ahead of celebrating our call and reaffirming our ordination vows, of adopting a somewhat lighter tone. But don't let that detract from the seriousness of our calling. As we prepare for Easter let each of us reflect on how we can exercise the ministries of lubrication, seasoning, propulsion and protection.

Even if that means having a good old Anglican argument about them.

The Bishop of Dudley
David Walker