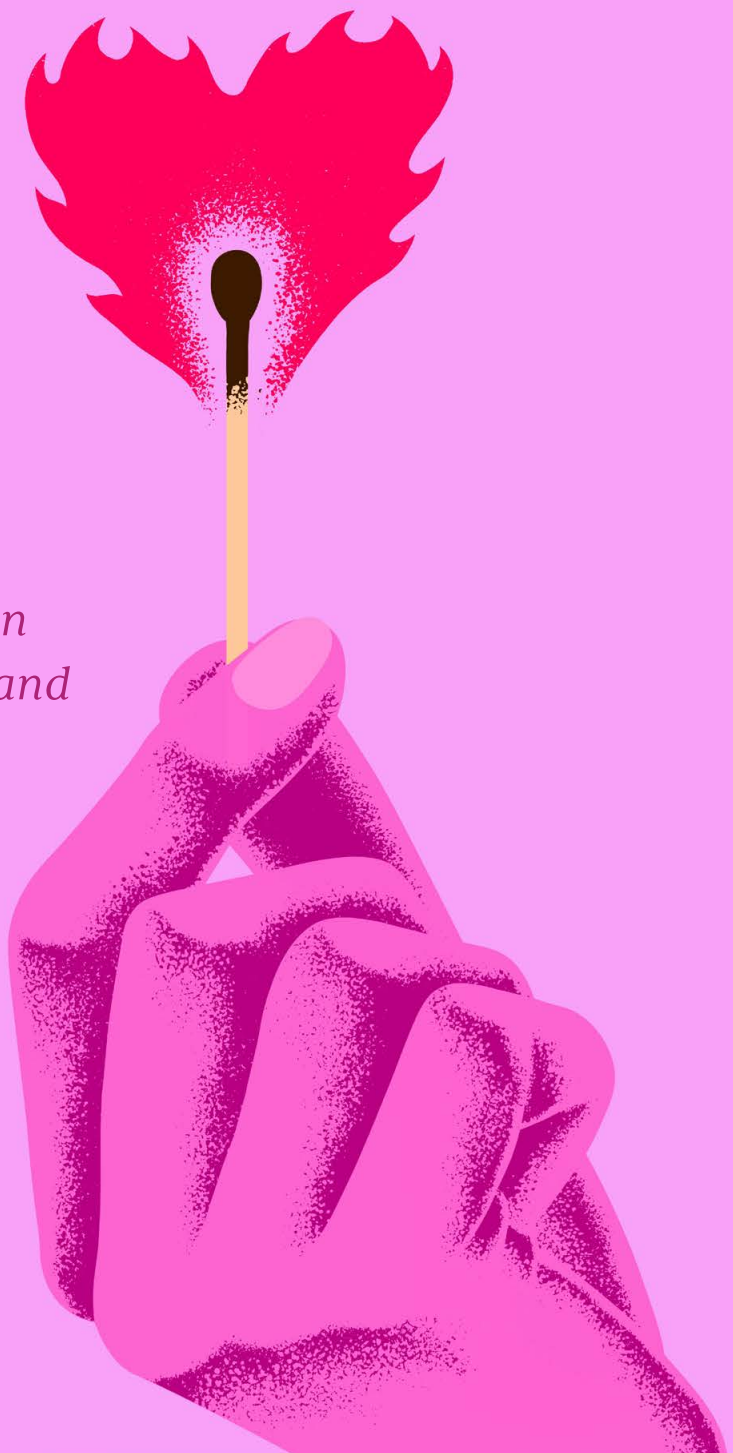
Keeping the Flame Alive in Local Ministry

MADI SIMPSON



Madi Simpson, Anglican Rector in Cumbria, shares some personal and practical insights on how to keep the flame alive in ministry.

> 'The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out. Every morning the priest is to add firewood...'
>
> Leviticus 6:12

I recall a session of Deanery Synod (an area gathering of Anglican clergy and church representatives) some years ago. I was a relatively new curate and had been invited to share a bit of my story and vision for the local church and for Cumbria. As it happened, I had been asked to do the same for the Bishop's Leadership Team and a few ecumenical extras a few weeks prior, and it had gone down well. There were no flies on my vision. After I had shared, a single voice rose up in the room: 'Well that's just youthful enthusiasm.' It belonged to one of the 'powers that be'. I was 41.

There will always be people to pour cold water on your flame. In my experience, they mainly pop up in church. Fortunately, as with Elijah on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18, cold water is no threat. Far from it: it actually makes magnificent fuel for fire.

A few more quenching comments from the archives: 'Are you really going there?' asked the college Dean. 'The problem is, they struggle to attract clergy,' commented a London vicar on return from the 2018 Moving Mountains mission. 'We've made the mistake of showing candidates a parish, but they never apply,' said the interviewer for a curacy post elsewhere. I savour these comments. They reveal so much, mainly the limits of other people's faith. Some people will insist on the gospel having no traction in certain places, whereas the Lord promises to be with us wherever we go.

Here are some things that sustain me and help keep the flame alive in local ministry:

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Two great truths carry me through the day: that there is a man risen from the dead, and that he is with me. We can't carry the flame for others if it's all a bit damp in our own souls. When I was a young adult, a church leader once wrote a reference for me, which stated, 'Madi has a simple faith.' I found it a bit patronising at the time (more cold water). Now I cherish it. I don't want to move on from childlike faith, simple wonder and awe in our Lord Jesus. Jesus is risen from the grave. Hallelujah! I don't ever intend to recover from that. Nor should the local church.

TAKE RISKS

Without challenge, we coast. Jesus could have made it all smooth waters and stormless skies for the disciples. He didn't. In fact, he 'made the disciples get into the boat' (Matthew 14:22). To be sure, a quiet life is acceptable to God (1 Thessalonians 4:11), but that doesn't mean sitting back on the call. Mission mostly doesn't come to us. Like the Good Shepherd, we need to exit the sheep fold and reach into the thorn bush for the lost sheep. Taking risks is also more fun. There are stories to tell, which Jesus seems to enjoy.

There were lots of reasons why we shouldn't move to Cumbria. Like Jesus and Bethlehem, it's a choice. Reach in. Reach in to the community you're in now. The Spirit knows how, and he will show you. In June, I met a couple of people who wanted nothing to do with God. Six weeks later, they requested a Bible, asking me to show them how to read it. I made next to no mention of God during the six weeks, but just showed up for them, carefully, prayerfully asking God to guide my words and actions. I could easily have stayed in my chair. The risk is simply doing whatever God tells you to do.

PIPE UP

Anglicans are very good at demure, but we are part of something vast and gloriously weird. Historian Tom Holland has said, 'Christians should preach the weird stuff.' It is traditional for Anglican clergy to give the notices at their licensing service. At my licensing, prompted by the Spirit, I dared myself to give only one notice: that Jesus is alive. I very nearly didn't say it. Because the Spirit prompted it, it made an impression. Small gestures, prompted by the Spirit, act like sparks. You don't need a big voice, big message or platform, just a word from God in scripture or prayer, and the courage to share it. He'll shape the words of an email and the words you share at the checkout. Pay attention, pipe up as the Spirit prompts, and sparks will fly.



GET THE KETTLE ON

After my training incumbent retired, I found myself praying alone for months at the weekly Wednesday morning church prayer meeting. No-one came. What brought it back to life was coffee and croissants. We now have 8-12 regulars, and pray for an hour instead of half an hour. If God gives you a vision for something, dial up the vision for that thing. Anything that helps people pray is fire!

LOWER EXPECTATIONS OF YOURSELF AND RAISE EXPECTATIONS OF GOD

Jesus wants to roll away stones and raise the dead, and we stand around saying, 'But Lord…' (John 11:39). We humans are limited, sinful and of little faith. Thank the Lord that he loves us anyway. Don't walk in the glory of your best days. You are fallible. Walk in the train of God's mercy and grace, and put your faith in him.

Finally, look after yourself, and look after your leaders – or, as a friend said, 'Say your prayers, do what you can, get some rest.' Ministry is tiring; all contexts are challenging, but God doesn't want any of us to burn out. Tend to yourself, your relationships, your family, and your own flame. We honour God and others in that. Good self-care keeps people safe and hearts warm.

REV. MADI SIMPSON

Madi is Rector of Ulverston in the South Lakes, leading both Ulverston Parish Church (www.ulverstonparishchurch.org) and St John's Osmotherley, a beautiful rural church on the Cumbria Way. She is married to James, with three teenage children.



Dave Greave photography

PRAYER FOCUS

KEEP THE FLAME ALIVE

Pray for all God's people to have a 'simple' faith which aims to focus entirely on God's agenda, and that they will be alert to the smallest prompt of the Holy Spirit. Pray that all workers for Christ will have the courage to step out in faith into whatever God may be asking, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and that he will help them to be diligent in prayer, constantly seeking his guidance (Psalm 25: 4-5; Hebrews 13: 20-21).

FOCUS ON THE CHURCH

The Methodist Church: Pray for the President and Vice-President, Rev. Mark Slaney and Caroline Stead, for inspiration, wisdom and discernment through the Holy Spirit, and for safe travel as they move around the Connexion. Pray for all Presbyters, Deacons, Local Preachers, and worship leaders to receive fresh inspiration from the Holy Spirit at the start of a new Connexional year. Pray for probationers taking up their first appointments, and for those who have come to serve in Britain from the world church, that they will adapt well to a different culture and new ways of doing things (1 Kings 3:7-9; Acts 20:28-31).

Cliff College: Pray for Rev. Andrew Stobbart as Principal; for all students in a new academic year, especially those who are new to the college, for suitable placements where students can share their faith and love of Jesus, and for adequate funding for all courses (Romans 10:13-15; 2 Timothy 4:1-4).

FOCUS ON NATIONAL ISSUES

Education: Pray for Lucy Powell, the Education Secretary, for protection for our children and young people against harmful ideologies, that the proposed introduction of witchcraft and paganism to the syllabus of the religious education curriculum will be strongly rebuffed and not tolerated, that all curricula will be honouring to God (Mark 9:42; Colossians 2:8).

FOCUS ON WORLD ISSUES

War torn areas of the world: Pray for the de-escalation of all conflicts, especially Russia/Ukraine, Israel/Gaza, and Sudan, for wisdom for peacemakers, for truth and justice to prevail over lies and deceit, and for God's will to be worked out in individual situations (Psalm 121; Psalm 55:22-23).

World poverty: Pray for people living in abject poverty through no fault of their own, for compassion and continuing aid from richer nations, for those who are forced to live in refugee camps, that they will have adequate food, sanitation, housing and health care, and for support and resources for charities tackling these situations (Matthew 25:34-45; Psalm 140:12).