

Drawbacks of the super-dynamic

AMONG the burdens of parish ministry today is the nagging feeling of constant failure generated by the bullet-point job descriptions that often accompany clergy job advertisements. It seems barely worth applying for advertised posts unless you are exceptional, gifted, innovative, dynamic, passionate, committed, energetic, encouraging, a "people-person", collaborative, and resilient - oh, and with a sense of humour.

Your ministerial task is not to preach the gospel, celebrate the sacraments, and visit the sick, but to produce a diverse, vibrant, flourishing, mission-focused, caring community by your abilities as a visionary leader with extraordinary communication skills who is able to get on with all ages and to appeal to outsiders.

I know archdeacons who claim credit for toning down the demands of parishes, but too many absurdly over-the-top adverts still make it into the church press. I find them exhausting, with their hopelessly aspirational language and excess of adjectives. They are also rather sad. What is reflected here so often is a community's wistful and rather narcissistic dream of what it believes it deserves or is owed. We are special, it cries out. Are you good enough for us?

And some clergy out there read the invitation in the light of unrealistic and vaguely messianic beliefs about themselves, genuinely reckoning that they can measure up to whatever is asked, however crazy it really is. They then spend hours filling in the kind of self-promotional letter of application intended to persuade the readers that they are just the right person for the job.

This is what happens when the Church tries to imitate business culture, aspiring to draw "stars" as if it had the resources to reward them with vastly more than a simple stipend and a potentially problem house. No wonder so many parish clergy suffer from discontent, guilt, and envy.

The trouble is that the job of parish ministry is both more modest and more humdrum than the adverts suggest. Much of it is routine, much is rewarding, some of it is lonely. Stars are not always helpful as parish priests; the apparently super-dynamic not infrequently turn out to be spiritually careless and pastorally inept.

It would not be so difficult to advertise for a competent, caring priest, without suggesting that only a celebrity who can cope on four hours' sleep a night will do. For most parishes, a competent, caring priest is not only the best they can hope for: it is actually the best there is.

The Revd Angela Tilby is Diocesan Canon of Christ Church, Oxford, and Continuing Ministerial Development Adviser for Oxford diocese.

Church Times, 6 December 2013