

From Amanda Russell-Jones and on behalf of Iwan Russell-Jones too
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Dear Friends,

We are both being licensed as Readers/Lay ministers on 17th July to serve in this parish and the emerging Garth Ministry Area. So Vicki asked us to introduce ourselves since many of you are probably thinking "never heard of them"! We started attending last summer on Zoom, then, when it became possible, in person. We were very grateful for the welcome we received, not least from Margaret who hailed us as we were walking away after a service, and, socially distanced of course, began asking who we were. Then we met Vicki one Sunday after church and having heard a bit more about us she asked if we were ordained or Readers and, if not, would we like to apply to be Readers?!

So, separately, we followed the usual path through the application/discernment process, ably steered by a very patient Colin Finney, and are pleased to say that Bishop June has decided to license us. But I haven't answered the question have I – who are we?

Iwan and I met as 18 year-olds studying for a theology degree and married a year after graduation. I grew up in Cheshire in an Anglican Church and Iwan grew up in Baptist manses in South Wales in both Welsh and English-speaking chapels. Our first date was walking round a golf course arguing about Infant baptism - we weren't playing golf just arguing about Infant baptism. It does not get more romantic than that - at least in our case it doesn't!

I went on to qualify as a teacher of Religious Studies and History and later English as a Foreign Language. The fact that I wave my hands around when I am trying to communicate is not just because we are now all wearing masks! Iwan went on to further study, first in Aberdeen, where we lived in a tenement with an outside loo and no bathroom, and then a couple of years later, in Oxford. In between we led a Christian rock band, playing in schools, universities, prisons and anywhere else that would have us across Europe, trying to communicate the Christian faith. Iwan is the musical one (something our kids have inherited) but we both enjoy helping to keep music and all the arts live and available for everyone to have a go at or simply sit back and enjoy.

We made Cardiff our home 37 years ago when Iwan began working as a producer at the BBC, first for the religion department and then for education, news and current affairs, music and factual/documentaries. As well as making programmes about things he already knew about, like Martin Luther King or the English Civil War, he also ended up with knowledge about weird niche topics such as the diseases of rhododendrons, or how to get a grand piano up Snowdon - ask him about that one.

Our four children went through Bishop of Llandaff High School and two of them also had stints in Radyr Primary and Whitchurch Sixth form. Turning out to watch our kids play for Danescourt football teams or Radyr cricket club were regular features.

We settled in St. Mark's Church, Gabalfa, not long after coming to Cardiff and over the years have been very grateful for the friendships made there, not least with those who were fellow travellers on the road of parenting teenagers.... Both of us preached and led services and were involved in teaching or helping to facilitate discussion as we and others explored the bible or a contemporary topic - usually the two together.

One of us played bass guitar and taught a teenage Sunday class and turned out for Dads against lads (as it was in those days) football matches. One of us helped lead a Mum's bible study with creche, then a monthly Sunday morning session for 5-18s based on a biblical theme with crazy games and competitions and as far as possible the older ones being the band, leading the prayers and doing the drama. I was also on the PCC and Vicar's warden and a member of the Deanery and Diocesan conferences and the Diocesan standing committee. St. Mark's was also asked to partner with St.Philip's, Tremorfa and it was lovely to be able to work with them on Holiday Bible clubs, Soccer school and what I call Noisy Church rather than Messy Church.

We can honestly say that we feel extremely privileged to have studied theology with so many students from around the world in the college where we met. We learned so much from them about the Christian faith and the Church in the settings and cultures and languages they lived and thought in. Our appreciation for the global Church has continued through being in a seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, USA for four years, where Iwan taught and I finished my Masters - nothing to do with golf :) Then, for the last 10 years, Iwan taught at Regent College in Vancouver - a graduate school of theology - and I began teaching there, too, after finishing my Ph.D. Our interaction with members of the global Church intensified as a large proportion of the students were from beyond North America and brought such rich experience of being engaged in figuring out what the gospel meant for their own culture and calling, whether that was being a Primary school teacher in Finland or a Graphic designer in Brazil or... For, although some students were in, or heading for, ordained ministry in various denominations, most were 'lay' people. And that's what we are, too.

We both feel, very strongly, that the Christian faith demands to be lived out in the world by the people of God wherever we happen to find ourselves. Following Jesus Christ isn't simply about Sunday worship but relates to our jobs, our families, our art, our relationships, our social and political responsibilities, our environment - to the whole fabric of life, in fact. But how?

In our gospel reading this Sunday, the people of Jesus' hometown say themselves that he has wisdom that he is trying to communicate, and they acknowledge that he is doing works of power/ miracles. But they don't believe in Him and are, instead, offended by his behaviour. The problem is that Jesus is just one of their own, the lad who grew up down the road, expected to follow his father's trade as a carpenter. So, on what authority is he setting himself up as a teacher/ prophet, and whose power is he channelling in his miracle working? They do not recognise the source of his authority as being from above, from his father in heaven whose work Jesus is actually called and equipped to carry out. They lack faith.

Then we see Jesus sending his followers out in pairs to the surrounding villages to teach and to share what they had discovered about him. Jesus is delegating some of his responsibility to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God and he is giving the disciples the authority to do it for him. If you like, it is time for the 12 disciples to gain some work experience.

According to Mark, when Jesus started going around Galilee 'proclaiming the good news of God', he said 'the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.' Then he called 12 men to be his disciples, saying, intriguingly, to the fishermen Simon and Andrew, 'Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' As time went by, larger groups wanted to listen to Jesus and tried to get near enough to hear what he was saying, and to see what he was doing. In every crowd Jesus addressed perhaps some were convinced that they wanted to begin following him whilst others thought they would like to hear him again or ask a question; and still others thought he was raising more questions than he was giving answers and they needed to get back out on the water and earn a living.

By the time we get to Jesus sending out the disciples, women and men had heard Jesus telling stories which might have varied slightly as he repeated them, adding a bit of local colour here, and a link with a particular group in the audience there. And it is only human nature that followers of Jesus and others who heard him must have repeated what he said and did.

Then Jesus decides it is time for official work experience and gives the disciples the authority to do his work - teaching, healing, and battling against the forces of evil. Doctors are only given the authority to practice medicine by other doctors. You cannot give someone authority over something unless you have that authority yourself. He teams each one up so that they are not a lone voice or a rogue operator and gives his followers instructions as to how they should conduct themselves as he sends them out. It is not all about what they wear, or showing how successful they are, or shopping around for the best offers of hospitality. Lest they think it is going to be a holiday, he warns them that they may be unwelcome and considered not worth listening to, and if that happens, they should not slink out of town but move on, head held high.

Useful preparation because perhaps the biggest test for the Church was whether there would **be** a Church after Jesus death, resurrection and ascension as the disciples went 'What do we do now?' That earlier work experience and much of Jesus teaching made it quite clear that he did not expect

to be the only one spreading the good news and building the kingdom. He came to call and empower all to join him. He told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit to be our guide and power but then they were to 'go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, of the Son and Holy Spirit'.

By the grace of God the good news spread, and is spreading, as more people follow Christ and his Church grows - perhaps in new ways and in new places. We look forward to getting to know you and sharing in this work experience together with all of you as we live and worship and, hopefully, have choices about accepting and offering hospitality!

Amanda and Iwan Russell-Jones

