

Alice Gerth finds perspective on life as a doctor

POPPING SOCIAL BUBBLES

I have a confession to make, I live in a bubble. A social bubble. I like to think that I don't, that as a doctor I mix with a huge variety of people with different backgrounds, beliefs and political leanings. Whether they are colleagues, doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, porters or patients. Not to mention, stopping to talk to the homeless man outside my local Tesco. I tell myself, that I am exposed to a wide cross section of society, have my views challenged, and engage with the effects of political policies. Unfortunately, this safe place of metaphorical 'back patting' has been disrupted through friendship with a bunch of eclectic ordinands (trainee Church of England priests) who have got me thinking.

Ordinands have all answered a call, spending many months (if not years) discerning if ministerial training is the path God is calling them on. They are going into a deeply vocational career and have all arrived at this place from very different origins: some are straight out of university, others have worked for churches, others are former police officers, city workers, and the list continues. In many ways, they are like doctors, they have a desire to serve others and accept that this will come at a personal cost: they have chosen a career that allows access to people at their most vulnerable. This 'ordinand bubble' has challenged me in three ways.

Gratitude

I grumble, a lot. This grumbling usually revolves around antisocial work hours and doctors not being paid as well as engineers, accountants, bankers etc. I live with two doctors but prior to them, I lived with an engineer. I go to a church where doctors and engineers make up the majority of the congregation. As such, I compare my hours and pay to the engineers who seem to have a half day every Friday and don't work weekends. I grumble with the doctors. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of allowing some of my ordinand friends to witness 'said grumble'. They very graciously pointed out that as a doctor, four years out of medical school, I likely had a salary larger than most of the ordinands would ever have, and that priests work weekends and Christmas. Their raised eyebrows said it all.

Hospitality

There is a difference between interacting with a broad spectrum of society and inviting them into your home. These ordinands are always happy to see me at their college when I'm visiting and have

welcomed me into their community. Beyond this, many of them have been placed at churches in parts of the city I tend to avoid. As part of their placements, they are becoming friends with, and are serving communities that are far beyond my comfort zone. I have met many people from many different backgrounds, but unlike them my group of friends is no less varied.

Unity and diversity

Finally, they have shown me that variety is the spice of the Christian life. There are of course core gospel truths, but beyond this is a diverse church. Last week at dinner, we debated the end times, discussed spirituality and challenged each other about churchmanship. Some identify as charismatic evangelicals, others as conservative evangelicals, others yet love the 'smells and bells' and The Book of Common Prayer, and others are Third Order Franciscans. Yet they live in community: united around a common love of God and their desire to serve him. There are moments of friction, but there is grace. It's a place where you can discuss your bad day over the washing up and where it is completely natural for someone to pray for you.

So, as I continue to spend time in my various social bubbles: church, work and home, I am trying to take some of these lessons with me. I am more grateful for the privilege of a stable job, even when I am up at 2am in the morning or missing church for the umpteenth time! I thank God for my salary and want to be more sacrificial in my giving. I try to remind friends that we are privileged compared to the majority of society, that we need to stop comparing ourselves to those above us and start befriending those lower down on the economic scale. Finally, I am engaging with a wider church background and seeking to understand others' faith before judging it for not fitting my own.

As Christian doctors we are entrusted with so much. Our work keeps us busy, but can lull us into a false sense of security about our social engagement. In so doing, it disguises our inward-looking hearts. It hides our absence of friends who would fit the biblical definition of an outsider. We need to challenge each other not just to interact outside our bubbles, but to love, and in so doing, to pop them.

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