

## **Parish Conversations: Summary and Reflections – PW, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2017**

This document attempts:

- to draw out some of the most prominent themes in the recent series of parish conversations
- to offer a few personal reflections on them
- to make some suggestions about where we go from here, as we move towards the revision of the Parish Mission Action Plan in June.

### **First Conversation: Discipleship**

*What kind of Christian is our parish trying to form?*

Those who are comfortable with questions, who recognise shades of grey, and who do not have to know all the answers. Those who are committed to others. Those who are generous. Those who focus on the greatest commandment. A church which understands that faith is a journey; a church which is worldly from a rootedness in God.

*What do we do well?*

a community of welcome, acceptance, support. The teaching at the services.

*What do we need more of?*

Challenge – to move out of comfort zones. Opportunity for dialogue about the Bible, about prayer, about relating faith to politics/culture/ethics. Quiet Days and Pilgrimages – a Parish Retreat?

### **Second Conversation: Evangelism**

*How do we think and feel about evangelism?*

Worried, anxious, and uncomfortable. Evangelism tends to be associated with cults or fundamentalism, or the techniques of 'cold-callers'. We worry that often evangelism is not especially interested in the actual person on the receiving end, other than as a potential convert. Yet we know it is commanded, and we should do it – so it is also guilt inducing. Largely, we prefer to witness by example and service rather than by words: 'preach the Gospel always, use words if you must.' (usually, incorrectly, attributed to S. Francis).

*What kind of evangelism would we like to do?*

One which smiled, which makes people welcome, which does not pressurise. Which invites people into community, which sees belonging as just as vital as believing. One which is passionate, which invites on a journey – and which communicates a spirit of openness to hard questions.

### **Third Conversation: Social Engagement**

*What is the biggest need of people in our area?*

We just don't know – it would be good to have more precise information e.g. about socio-economic profile of the area. However, we have a strong hunch that isolation is a key theme – something which affects people of all ages and often those who do not obviously seem lonely. What people really need is friendship, listening, emotional support. Within that we also notice the following major issues: family breakdown; debt and poverty; bereavement/loss; consumerism; work-life balance and guilt; anonymity; financial poverty; the breakdown of respect; lack of provision for teens; Intolerance; the cost of housing; withdrawal of bus services; ageing; cost of living.

*What are our churches doing?*

Lots – especially when we fully recognise what individual members are doing. Abbots Langley Good Neighbours; our support for the CAB and Food Bank; lots of visiting (both formal 'church' visits and just friendly ones); Sunday lunch club; coffee, crafts and tots groups; School Governing; the pastoral role of the parish office. Financial support for charities – Christian Aid and the Malosa project in Malawi.

Don't underestimate the significance of the building: simply its presence and availability to the community as a place of sanctuary.

*What might we do?*

Shift the focus from 'the elderly' in the 2012 MAP to 'meeting isolation'. Major on our ministry of welcome and community. Join this up with the occasional offices – how do we serve those with young children/whose marriages may be in difficulty/ who have been bereaved - beyond taking the service? How do we offer them friendship and community?

### **Fourth Conversation: Children and Young People**

*How does our church provide for children and young people?*

Most Sundays, at least 10% of our congregation is under 10 years old. Tiny Tots now regularly attracts 15 plus toddlers: about three quarters of these are not regular church-goers. We run Messy Church with the Methodists once a month – about twenty children (largely under 8, and largely not the same as the Sunday regulars) come to that. We have an extensive christening ministry, and our Second Sunday service is specially aimed at families with young children. This is not bad!!

*What could we do better?*

We need to make the church feel more like one, all-age community – without dumbing down or losing what is good about the order and calm of the standard 9.30. We also need to cater better for older children (9-16), on Sunday mornings and/or throughout the week. It would be good to get a wider range of adults and children doing things together, not just the children's leaders doing children's activities.

Could children remain in the 9.30 till the Gloria, and come back at the Peace? So we are all together for significant parts of the service, but in age-appropriate groups for the readings, sermon and prayers? This would also make planning Seekers sessions easier...

Need to split the Seekers into a junior (e.g. 4-8) and senior (e.g. 9-13) section: currently it is difficult to teach well across the whole age-range.

Some role for a shared adult/junior choir – perhaps a non-robbed music group, doing different styles of music every so often?

Could children join the sidespeople/welcomers rota (easier to do if they're in till the Gloria).

### **Fifth Conversation: Worship**

*What do we value in worship?*

Good preaching (not too long, thank you), good music, being made to think, a little bit of silence, and encouragement. The building: the sense of consecrated space, people having prayed here for centuries – a sense of community with them as well as the church today.

*What could we do better?*

We ask Sundays to do a lot... there is not time to do all the engagement with scripture, or all the community building, or all the silence/prayer one might want.

It would be good to have a variety of voices at the front – more preachers, possibly including laypeople? And not just different voices, but different *styles* – Sally's stories remembered well.

But if people are going to do things, they need to do them well: e.g. to read clearly.

Does our worship get the balance of reason/emotion or left brain/right brain right? Is our temptation towards the cerebral? Where does *love* of God get expressed in our worship?

### **Peter's personal reflections on the conversations overall:**

1. The importance of *community*: people really value belonging to this community at all sorts of levels – from the simple pleasure of feeling connected and rooted with people, to a sense that this is one of the things that really helps them grow spiritually. There's also a sense that community is one of the most vital things we have to offer in terms of our social engagement, and also in terms of evangelism. People's deepest *need*, we sense, is to be drawn into a community which is on a journey towards God – and that's what we are, and what we offer.

Yet we also need to be aware that communities tend to believe their own propaganda too easily: not everyone *does* encounter us as open, welcoming, and supportive. Some people do feel cold-shouldered, unwelcome, left-out – even for something as simple as sitting in 'someone's seat'. There's always a great deal of subjectivity in these reactions, but it is not just *all* in the eye of the beholder: I've seen us get welcome badly wrong. How can we deliberately focus on being a more welcoming community?

2. Beyond welcome, I think there is a real desire for this to be a rather more real community – where isolation to some extent can be undone. It might be good to revisit something like the old Pastoral Visiting scheme which used to operate, where a team of visitors might each take responsibility for getting to know a section of the electoral roll. It would also be good to maximise the possibilities for people to get involved in small groups/short courses where they can get to know each other better. We also need to make sure that the ways of getting involved in the church's life are obvious and open. Perhaps something like a yearly time and talents audit, or a 'job market': these are the things the church really needs people to be involved in, could it be you? If people want to hang back, then fine – but do we do enough to signal to people how they *could* be involved, do we make room for them?
3. I think there is a significant common factor underlying our unease with many forms of evangelism, the sense that we want to grow more in prayer and in understanding about the faith, and the risk perceived by some that our worship may err in the direction of being too formal, too cerebral, too passive. Bluntly, when people talk about loving Jesus or their relationship with God, we are slightly uncomfortable – and that is not *just* because we are reserved types who don't talk about that kind of thing lightly. I think it is also because it is too easy, in churches like ours, for the relationship with God to be equated with coming to church, going through the liturgy, being part of the community. We need, I think, to focus on how our church encourages individuals to grow in their relationship with God. We are not just a community, we are a community *of individuals growing in relationship with God*. We need to think about how to equip individuals to do that growing, and how to talk about it. Sunday morning worship alone can't really do all this. Hopefully Preachers Workshop, Pilgrim Courses (or equivalent) and above all sessions helping people learn about prayer will help to address the gap. It will be great if we can identify laypeople who either have or can gain the confidence to lead such sessions: there will hopefully be far too much demand for the vicar to meet alone, even if that were desirable.
4. Social engagement: we need to think less about this in terms of 'what charities shall we support financially' and more in terms of 'how does our life as a church serve the needs we see in this community?'. An obvious and exciting thing, it seems to me, would be to think this around our occasional offices. So, for instance, around our wedding ministry we could develop work in preparing people for marriage and in supporting family life/relationships in trouble. This *could* be through financial support of e.g. Relate, but could we also think of more imaginative ways in which the congregation itself could help in the support of marriage, in the raising of children, in countering domestic violence around the parish? Around funerals, could we help people think about death before it happens (the hosting of 'death cafes' for instance), and invest more in the recruitment and training of bereavement visitors?
5. We've been lucky with Messy Church in that a great deal of the energy behind it – and it has been very labour intensive – has been provided by Derek and Chris from the Methodist Church. The end of their time (summer 2018) here is rapidly approaching, and by September of this year it will need to be clear whether there will be sufficient commitment and involvement to keep it going. Factoring in the growing success of Tiny Tots (and perhaps the need for extra volunteer support there), and that we might split Seekers into two different age groups (requiring more help there), *and* that it would be good to start thinking about a youth group ... committing to Messy Church seriously is a big decision. It will also be

important to take into account what the Catholic Church does with its newly appointed children & youth worker both in terms of Messy Church and teenage provision.

6. Second Sunday services: a question I went into the parish conversations with was – ‘why do we act as if all-age worship is the exception to the norm here – the norm being the standard, very adult 9.30 service?’ One possibility would have been to move to an alternating pattern, where every other Sunday was all age (perhaps with Choral Evensong being reintroduced on those Sundays). However, there was no real desire for that, and a sense that actually the order and tradition and overall feel of the ‘standard’ 9.30 is something that shouldn’t get lost. There was also a concern though to make the transition between Second Sundays and every other Sunday less dramatic than it currently is/has been. To an extent, we’ve done this by making Second Sundays always Eucharistic, and if we move to having the children in for more of every 9.30 service (leaving after the Gloria, rejoining at the Peace) that will also help. It would also be quite reasonable to have the occasional more contemporary hymn sung at the beginning of a non-second Sunday service – why not something like ‘Bless the Lord O my Soul’, for instance, especially if we had a music group as well as the choir occasionally leading worship. You could go some way in this direction without losing what makes the current 9.30 work well.

However, the more inclusive the standard 9.30 is made, and the less dramatic the difference between it and the Second Sundays, the more the question of why we have Second Sundays at all sharpens. Currently they seem to be functioning quite well (at least in terms of drawing in good numbers of children and their families) – but are we risking buying into/creating the impression that church is only a monthly activity? Or, for some of our other members, that this is the Sunday they can ‘take off’? What’s our rationale for Second Sundays – do we not have confidence that our standard 9.30 can really be something good for all ages? We need to worry more about this.

7. I’m very conscious that all these reflections are St. Lawrence centered – there is very little specifically to do with Bedmond in them. This is at least partly because there was very little Bedmond participation (with some honourable exceptions) in the parish conversations! A major issue for the parish (not just for the Bedmond congregation) is to figure out what role Bedmond Church plays in the overall strategy of the parish, and what future the congregation there imagines for itself.
8. Perhaps not many people need persuaded on this point, but one thing that came over repeatedly in the conversations was the need to value the church building properly: as an aid to prayer, as a community resource, as a place of private contemplation, as a symbol of the church’s presence in the village since the village began. We must not be embarrassed or half-hearted about the need to maintain the building: it helps mission in this place. It would be right to give it some prominence in the stewardship campaign – it isn’t an expensive encumbrance that stops us from doing our real work.

## **Proposal**

To assemble six working parties to think more about the key themes: discipleship; evangelism; pastoral care; social engagement; children & young people; worship. The primary aim of these groups is to think, pray and plan – not necessarily to actually *do* the frontline work, but to help make it happen.

The groups would have no more than six people on them. The Vicar would sit on each group, and at least one member of PCC should also be on each group (preferably, a different member on each group). The Director of Music would sit *ex officio* on the Worship group, and one person should sit on both Worship and Youth & Children.

Beyond that, we would recruit by a mix of open appeal and personal invitation.

Apart from the Vicar, no-one should sit on more than two groups: allowing lots of space for others to become involved and limiting the load on those already involved.

Each group to try and meet at least once between now and June 17 – when we hoped to have put together the MAP. This is especially relevant for the groups on Discipleship, Evangelism and Mission as they closely reflect the three themes of the Diocesan Strategy the MAP is based around: growing deeper into God; making new disciples, and transforming communities. However, the existence of all the groups is open-ended, and their task goes beyond helping draw up the MAP: it is to keep pushing their particular area in the life of the church forward.

### **Discipleship.**

To plan and pray for all that helps us be a community of individuals growing in relationship with God: short courses, study groups, preacher's workshop, retreats and quiet days, vocations, stewardship

### **Evangelism.**

To plan and pray for all that helps us make new disciples: looking especially at how we engage those coming for the occasional offices (especially christenings and weddings), and how we can encourage people to bridge the gap between participation in those services and becoming a committed Christian? Also looking at courses/presentations/evenings aimed at getting the parish to think about God – not just the existing congregation.

### **Pastoral Care**

To plan and pray for all that will make us a caring community: how are we ensuring that everyone within the church community is looked after and is well supported in times of difficulty? To discern what the big issues facing members of our community are, and to devise ways of helping people meet them.

### **Mission**

To plan and pray for all that helps the church meet the needs of the wider community: possibly, though this still needs testing, with the idea of 'isolation' as an underlying theme across many areas of need, and structuring our response around the occasional offices relating to birth, marriage and death. Also to encompass how we might support local schools, the 'eco-church' agenda, and the international dimension of the Church's mission – with a special focus on the Malosa Hospital Project.

## **Worship**

To plan and pray for all that helps the public worship of our churches. Particular foci might include: the purpose and nature of the second Sunday services, the provision of something like Taize services, the kinds of music and hymnody we use in worship, feedback on preaching/ general conduct of worship, any redesign of services.

## **Children and Youth Work**

To plan and pray for all that will help our churches become genuinely all-age communities. Remit includes: thinking about Tiny Tots, Messy Church, crèche and Seekers, Second Sundays, Youth Choir and the all-age character of *all* 9.30 services, the place of Confirmation in our church, provision for teenagers.