

Let's Talk

It has been good to talk to my staff and people in the parish about *Let's Talk* which I think is asking the right questions.

What is the personality and character of Canford Magna Churches?

We are a little different here at Canford as we are three churches, but one parish, which I suspect is almost unique in the diocese. My colleagues, Geoff, Andy and I share the same values and aims but we have different visions for each church, reflecting the quite dissimilar contexts in which we minister.

Canford Magna Parish Church is an ancient building which has a heritage and history going back many years. I suppose in the last 100 years, with the Guest family (of GKN fame) installed at the old house at Canford (now the School) and especially Lady Wimborne there has been a long evangelical tradition. In fact, Lady Wimborne's finance helped 'plant' St Luke's Parkstone and St John's Wimborne (besides others), long before church planting was thought about.

In recent memory, with the arrival of Revd John Collins in the 1970's, the church caught the charismatic wave sweeping North America and Britain and since then there has been a strong New Wine and Vineyard affiliation. This has led to the church being a centre of this brand of Anglicanism and we have naturally attracted those in the Wimborne area of a charismatic open evangelical persuasion.

This led to significant church growth, which has ebbed and flowed, but in the Parish as a whole we are about 450 in Fairer Share numbers and, living in a middle class fairly affluent area, a category B. Numbers in the Parish Church vary, but we are around 150. We are slowly growing as a church, in all three centres.

Priorities

Mission

Our top priority is to be more outward facing. We believe we are a mission minded church (and we are – giving away £65k last year, besides our own churches' work). But we question whether we are effectively reaching the un-churched, or de-churched, with the message of Jesus.

Prayer and Worship

Like many Anglican churches, we are ageing. Our top priority is to appeal to a wider spectrum of ages. This means a 'mixed economy' of services. The introduction of our Fresh Expression service, Breakfast@9, has added a whole new congregation. So new forms of worship are a priority, as well as keeping some of the best of the Anglican liturgy we know and love. This inevitably puts strain on staff as they oversee more services, but as a church we need to enable the laity more effectively to lead.

All our churches have a regular prayer meeting, but we need to be spending more time in corporate prayer. This is about creatively using space and silence, which we are not particularly good with at Canford.

Discipleship

Our third priority is discipleship. We have developed a 'roadmap' which helps to grow the natural progression using Courses, House Groups (or Life Groups as they are called), sermons and other

teaching. So many people slip away from church because they are looking for structured teaching to enable them to grow in their faith.

One thing to take on

Expanding our social justice voice without diluting the Christian truths we hold so dear, could have a significant impact on many people outside the church. The church has the reputation of being bigoted and self centred, obsessed with sexual morality and sometimes, outright nasty. Jesus was the opposite and we must be the same. A church with the reputation of just *being kind* is a very good thing. Teaching and discipleship can come later.

Showing genuine love and concern for people, especially the elderly, the disabled, those in prison and on the margins of our society and the poor, both home and abroad, has to become more than words, and put into action.

Ways of working together better

I would like to think that the Diocese and Senior Staff are taking evangelicals more seriously. This word 'evangelical' is very loaded but I suppose it's the part of the church that believes that the main issue of the Reformation was the struggle between biblical authority and church authority. We earnestly believe that the church cannot teach, preach or seek to practice anything which contradicts scripture, a line which Michael Ramsey defended, interestingly, in his introduction to Peake's commentary on the Bible.

The biggest elephant in the room is, we all know, human sexuality, blessing of same sex relationships and 'gay marriage'. These are issues because of the biblical authority question that as evangelicals we can't just ignore. If driven through without consultation and careful consideration they will split the church, and so utmost sensitivity is required.

In the Wimborne Deanery we have managed to put aside our differences on these issues and work very well together on a number of projects. Having something tangible to work together on is very good at breaking down barriers. It encourages conversations and then we find out that we are all flawed, brittle people and only able to say we follow Jesus because of the grace of God. And so I'm a great believer in the power of the Deanery. We are very blessed with a great Rural Deanery team, including an excellent assistant RD, treasurer, and Standing Committee. We seem to have lively and engaging Deanery Synods and Chapters.

One of our key challenges is the decline in the rural areas. We must be more creative in engaging parishes to 'do church' differently in these rural areas, working with, perhaps the bigger urban churches and the Deanery to resource them.

I do apologise that this letter is a couple of days late from your 30 April deadline. I hope that the points and views can be included in your final deliberations and discussions with Senior Staff.

Thank you for listening, and for your kindness and care towards Sandra in recent months.

Warmest regards,

Canon Chris Tebbutt, Team Rector of Canford Magna Churches and Rural Dean of Wimborne