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The Bishop of Salisbury

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## **'LET US TALK' – ABOUT ST MARY'S CHURCH, CODFORD**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Scope of the question.**

One of Bishop Nicholas's current themes is to 'talk about the Character and Personality of the Diocese of Salisbury' which emanate, he believes, from those of our parish churches. In fact, we have considered this question in our PCC, and at our AGMs through our Annual Report, a number of times in recent years and most recently when we wrote a full brief to welcome a new Associate Priest to the Upper Wylde Valley Team, so we can answer swiftly and fully.

Next, he wishes to know about the priorities of our local church, if there is one thing we would like to take on or develop in the coming year, are there ways we can work together with neighbouring churches to achieve more and, finally, how best can we measure the quality and impact of church life. We consider this regularly, consolidate plans annually and set out future aims in our Annual Review.

#### **Context of our answers.**

First, we try to go about God's business within two guiding principles of the Upper Wylde Valley Team;

- Mission: To grow in the love of God.
- Vision: To be open, welcoming, growing and inclusive churches, living within the love of God and sharing God's life and love with others.

Second, we have a clear direction set out in the Team's 'Five Marks of Mission' whose headings are Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform and Treasure. These headings are self-explanatory but there is much more to them than just the headings.

#### **Realism**

Realism has to feature in any plan otherwise we end up in wonderland of dreams, so while we agree entirely that it is important to have a mission to aim for and a vision of how we see ourselves achieving it, we are the first to accept that we fall short and that some aspirations remain just that. We do try, however, and our failures are matched by some real successes of which we are proud. 'Doing the best we can' is laudable, but only if we accept we can do better.

## AIM

The aim of this paper is to give the Bishop an insight into the way St Mary's Church, its congregation, those on its electoral roll, and its 'supporters' club' live and work together within the wider envelope of the Upper Wylve Valley Team. This is not a prospectus; rather, it is a 'warts and all' summary because no one is perfect – and we certainly aren't! It therefore will give you a flavour of our church and its people in the hope that it may help with your 'Let us Talk' project. Finally, we hope it will reassure you, or perhaps concern you, that we are probably quite typical of a rural parish that, like so many these days, enjoys the ministry of some dedicated and devoted priests but does not have sole call on their services.

## INFORMAL PRAYER AND FORMAL WORSHIP

We can pray anywhere. Indeed, some individuals will pray in quiet solitude out in the countryside and others on the Tube, on the bus or in the crowded streets of London. We pray in cars, on boats, on aeroplanes, out walking the dog and in bed and we pray to say thank you, to ask for forgiveness or to seek help or protection. Because God is everywhere there are no restrictions, other than those imposed by ourselves, on where we talk to Him, but most Christians agree that there is a need for a focus for worship and that is usually a church. Man's ingenuity will always find a place but most of us have no need; there is a church building in the parish and this is where we gather, every now and again, to worship together, to pray together, to rejoice together and to mourn together.

Most of us believe that we have a responsibility to maintain the ancient building and to keep its fabric in good repair as an act of faith with our ancestors, many of whom died to establish it, as a comfortable and welcoming place for current generations and as a sound prospect for future ones. There is nothing wrong with this aim but we must recognise that it requires resources – financial, personal and practical in terms of time and effort.

## ONE CHURCH, TWO BUILDINGS

We love our church and, because we have St Peter's just up the road in Codford, are privileged to have two places to worship in a village of fewer than 1000 people. Some, understandably, do not see it as a privilege; rather, it can be seen to dissipate and stretch resources, divide loyalties and common sense says there should only be one of them. Many discussions have taken place over the years about this issue; most agree we have one church too many but no one will agree which one to close! Our hearts rule our heads here but, in support, our Rector is keen to stress that closure of either is not on the agenda at present, and need not be while the two can sustain themselves. One important fact is that the dependencies of each is quite small; another is that if one closes it will not necessarily double the congregation in the other – in fact, it probably will not. The Upper Wylve Valley Team is undergoing a study into how the 'character' (as the Bishop put it on his visit to the Deanery last summer) of its ten churches can develop to provide 'something for everyone' and thus retain present congregations and attract new ones. This work, although embryonic, is exciting and engaging and is one of the ways ahead and could mean fewer services but more varied ones. New ways take time to develop but this could be one way of widening the Church's appeal and is an example of **'how neighbouring churches are working together.'**

The 'bottom line' to the 'two churches in one village' topic at the moment is summarised in Rev Ian Duff's much vented adage – 'we have one Church in Codford, but two buildings in which to worship'. This has been helpful guidance and many people agree. Some (actually, only a very few) will not set foot in the 'other' one and we need to improve cross-fertilisation and inclusiveness steadily and in an evolutionary way rather than a revolutionary one. The good news is that in the last year or so we have had more joint PCC meetings, more joint events and we exchange minutes of single church PCC meetings. More people are attending the other church, in both directions. The principle of One Church works but there are still parochial issues - and there always will be. As always, compromise should prevail. With ten churches in the UWV Team now, there is 'something for everyone' already and we should be persuading those who want to go, for example, to Matins or a Family Service to do so in another church and not wait for it to come round to theirs.

### **OUR CHURCH BUILDING – THE ROCK ON WHICH WE BUILD**

Our church has a long history. Maintaining it is a worry, but no different to those of any custodian of a historic building. The PCC is responsible for maintenance that is paid for, usually, by the PCC and donations from the Friends of St Mary's. This small group of benefactors raises money from a variety of fundraising events. We work hard, both in raising the money and in organisational terms, to meet the recommendations and requirements of the Quinquennial Reviews and to make the building warm, comfortable and welcoming; after all, the church may be a rock but it need not be a hard place. We aim to have a building that is connected to the wider community and is not seen to be 'just for members'; it is open seven days a week, we serve refreshments after most services, we have facilities for all ages (but no kitchen or toilet) and access is reasonable for the disabled. It is light, reasonably warm and has a sound and loop system. We do not tick every box but we are satisfied we are doing our best.

The visitors' book in our church bears witness to many peoples' admiration, not just of the building but also for the way it and the surroundings are kept. We get many visitors who have been to the ANZAC graveyard adjacent to the church and it and our own cemetery are kept tidy and with up to date records.

### **FINANCES**

Our church finances are in a reasonable state at present but a disaster with the fabric of the church, an unreasonable Share demand or statutory requirements can change that for the worse overnight. Like so many parishes, the Share gives us all sleepless nights; our congregation and supporters are stretched financially already and the elastic is very tight. Increasing our supporters and our donors, and thereby our bank balance, is linked to evangelism which is made all the more difficult by the unending, daily, pressures on peoples' time and pockets. When resources are tight and the water is up to our necks it is difficult to be 'outward facing'.

### **THE PEOPLE – CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY**

We are a pretty straightforward and 'conservative' lot in St Mary's. Our inclination is to the traditional but we have embraced most of the Church of England's innovations readily and happily. We have moved with the times, and familiarity with 'new' orders of service has led to contentment over time. We do not particularly like noise and 'happy clappy-ism', but can cope with either occasionally; we retain Hymns A&M

books but we have bought the newer Hymn Praise to give us more flexibility. Our congregations are not large enough to manage more than one unknown hymn in a service. One or two of us unreasonably resent strangers sitting in 'our pew' and whilst we are happy to shake hands with anyone, we are reluctant to go much further than that; the 'peace' divides the congregation into the willing who wish to be inclusive and the old-fashioned reserved who find it intrusive and over familiar. Despite this rather fuddy-duddy image, we really do welcome strangers in our midst and enjoy their presence. St Mary's is a welcoming church and an easy-going and happy community.

The Electoral Roll stands at 39. We are always anxious to increase it and have done so this year as it is time for a full review. About 20 - 25 are regular attendees at church. Of this 25, some 15 are either members of the PCC, or are sides men or are both. Our congregations are routinely relatively small, about 20, but people turn out in greater numbers for special events.

There are a number of devoted and hard-working people who make St Mary's work. Our PCC, with one exception who brings wisdom to our dealings, are all aged under 67 and a couple are in their forties but we do have an aspiration to reduce the average age of this important group. One of the benefits of parochialism is everyone does know each other and looks after each other. People volunteer readily to help in our church and at fundraising events and coffee after the 9.30 service and other community aspects are well supported. The church is kept clean and tidy and our flowers are stunning; reading, sides men, refreshment and other rosters are reliable and work. In fact, a small number of people do a lot and their help is greatly appreciated. Without them our church community would grind to a halt eventually.

## **ISSUES**

Bearing in mind the average age of our congregation, about 60 plus - and we are trying to reduce this - it is not surprising that some issues are important and some take on an importance which can be seen by outsiders to be petty and parochial. I list some of them to exemplify the realities of life; they are generalisations and in no particular order of priority or seriousness:

- Frequency and type of services. Naturally, you can't please all of the people all of the time and compromises can usually be found but we have not been very good in the past about communicating parameters, reasons and decisions. I do not think we have made best use of all our local outlets to communicate, but we are aware of how letterboxes are bombarded with 'junk' and do not wish to add to it. We have plenty of notice boards for information and the two news vehicles, the Ashton Gifford News and the Parish News are delivered to about 2000 homes. That all said, we tend to shy away from door stepping and could do more in this respect.
- The Choir and St Mary's do not mix easily. The choir does not sing in St Mary's because the conditions do not suit it. Our organist is wonderful but he is a piano player not a trained organist. We sometimes sing one song to the tune of another - but we don't mind. It is part of our character.
- The Peace. We take part in the Peace but would rather it is limited to a simple handshake rather than hugs and kisses all round; we know this is seen to be reserved but it probably reflects the attitude of most of our middle-aged or elderly congregation and is perfectly understandable - we think!

- Acoustics. The acoustics in most of our churches are not brilliant and some of our congregation are hard of hearing. St Mary's is not bad but many people still can't hear. We have installed a loop system but we also need to encourage clergy and lesson/prayer readers (and especially children) to speak clearly, and directly to the congregation. Seeing is being able to lip read.
- Disabled access. We have conducted our disability audit and we realise that to make our church safe is one thing; to make it completely accessible to the disabled will be another, and hugely expensive. We manage well routinely.
- We are universally horrified at the glass ceiling imposed on women priests and divided on the issue of gay marriage in church.

### **Priorities**

Our priorities are to attract younger members onto the PCC and into our church and to keep our heads above water in the financial whirlpool we live in.

### **If there is one thing....**

If there is one thing we would like to develop in the coming year it is to improve our links with the young. To do that we will have to be less introspective and conservative and investigate what, today, might wrest the young from their iPads and iPods to come and help. We are not alone in finding this difficult in the face of secular draws.

### **CONCLUSION**

The PCC is tackling most of the problems; some do not matter much but others keep us on our toes. Fortunately, we have some talented people to help us solve them and we know we can rely on the clergy to help with many of them.

### **Quality and Impact**

As to 'the quality and impact of church life,' our church building is a focus in the community and its fabric is sound for the time being; we have a regular and loyal congregation; we can call on a number of others who do not come to church who help willingly; the church community is probably the only organisation in the parish to know so much about its parishioners and how to offer, co-ordinate and provide help where it is needed and, finally and tellingly, most of the rest of the parish 'would rather the church was there than not'. A fundraising lunch recently was attended by over 100 people from all walks of life in the village and raised almost £700.

Lest some of this paper, and the realities of rural, somewhat introspective community life it portrays, seem at all depressing, I close on a high note. God's work is prevalent everywhere in Codford and it is a happy place. Codford St Mary Church thrives, our finances are under control and the mood of our congregation and supporters is buoyant. As everyone these days requires a 'bottom line' it is that St Mary's Parish Church is loved by some, used by more and tolerated by most. These days, that's pretty good.

**St Mary's PCC**