

'Let Us Talk'

The response from St Mark's Church, Herston, Swanage

Introduction

St Mark's Church has always been a church that is willing to talk about its history, its spirituality, its mission. It cares about its worship and its outreach. It is particularly passionate and mindful of its place in the local community. But it is also mindful of its place within the Swanage and Studland Team Ministry and the Deanery of Purbeck, as well as its role within the Diocese of Salisbury. It looks both inwards and outwards, and yearns to be the church family that is an integral part of the body of Christ.

A Recent Survey

Just under two years ago, St Mark's undertook a detailed consideration of where it was as a worshipping and mission-focused community, with a view to praying about, and discerning where it might best direct its future focus. Revd Wendy Fellingham initiated this survey in July 2011, shortly after taking on lead responsibility at St Mark's for worship, pastoral care and administration, and as part of the church's input to the Purbeck Deanery Plan. A questionnaire was distributed to everyone on the electoral roll, as well as other regular worshippers. The responses were collated and evaluated by Prebendary Andy Roberts, a retired priest in the Swanage and Studland Team, and a former Team Vicar at St Mark's. The results of that survey are shown at **Appendix One**.

During the eighteen months since that questionnaire, many of its findings have inspired change – both in the nature and variety of worship, as well as other initiatives of outreach. Messy Church has gone from strength to strength, and a monthly All Age Worship, involving many of the children from St Mark's School – with whom there is a really good and growing relationship - is now the service with the highest numbers attending. Other outreach activities have also been considered, and some implemented (e.g. 'Bell Street Breakfast.')

And, as with many congregations, there have been changes in the size of the congregation: in the last year alone, and inevitably - given its largely elderly congregation - 10% of that congregation has died; and there have been new members who have joined the church family, as a result of baptisms, a wedding and others moving into the area, and making St Mark's their spiritual home. A children's choir for All Age Worship has been initiated and there are now a few children singing in the senior choir, robing for Sunday Eucharistic worship. All of this acknowledges that it's not about the numbers of those attending worship that is the key factor; it is about the way the church impacts on those who live nearby and responds to perceived community needs.

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It would be true to say that the congregation has felt the outworkings of the results of that detailed survey 18 months ago to be the most significant, ongoing way in which they are currently moving forward as a church community in terms of mission and outreach, both sacramentally and socially. In a way, this could be seen as a similar activity to 'Let's Talk', which probably accounts for the smaller response to the questions posed in this newer initiative. Was there, perhaps, a sense of being 'questionnaire'd-out'?! However, the significant and heartening fact is the way in which St Mark's church continues to look at itself and its place within the community, and to be responding, practically and prayerfully, to that.

The fullest individual response to the questions posed in the 'Let's Talk' presentation is included at **Appendix Two** in its entirety. Other responses have echoed much of what is written there. Phrases such as: 'We are a welcoming and caring church community'; our personality and character, linked with our priority to 'serve the community of Herston', indicate a real sense of the importance of outreach. St Mark's also has, as a priority, 'to support and encourage the present church family, growing opportunities to welcome more people of all ages into that family.' The continuing strong and meaningful links with the Church school next door are also appreciated and there is a strong sense of wanting these links to continue, once the school moves to its new location next year.

There is a strong sense of how St Mark's works together with neighbouring churches, acknowledging that 'working together will always achieve more'; whether that be with the other Anglican churches in the Team, or with the new Baptist church – where good links have already been established with its members in advance of their moving into their new church building close by.

And it is appreciated that one of the key things to be focusing on and developing in the coming year is the 'pattern and content of worship', and how that 'might change and evolve to encourage those who attend All Age Worship to become more regular attenders at other times and services.'

There is much to celebrate about the church family at St Mark's; it is sensitive to the needs both of its own regular members and those who may come from time to time; and also of those who may only come to the church on 'High days' and 'Holidays.' It looks inwards at itself, and wants to offer the very best to God in worship; but it is also outward-facing, and with a welcoming smile.

Revd Wendy Fellingham April 2013

Two Appendices >>

Appendix One

St Mark's Church Review

Demographics of returns

46 questionnaires were returned (17 men & 29 women)

There were no returns under the age of 30

31 – 40 = 1 (F)

41 – 50 = 1 (F)

51 – 60 = 4 (2F & 2M)

61 – 70 = 17 (6M & 11F)

71 – 80 = 11 (4M & 7F)

81 – 90 = 8 (2M & 6F)

Over 90 = 4 (3M & 1F)

Years attending St Mark's

<5 yrs = 12 (4 of whom have recently joined the congregation)

6 – 20 yrs = 11

21 – 69 yrs = 17

Over 70 yrs = 5

* The congregation is predominantly elderly.

* 48% have been members for over 20 years

* However, 26% have joined the congregation in the last 5 years, so membership is far from being static.

Attendance

67% (31) attend most Sundays.

In addition there are 3 who attend regularly when they are resident (approx 6 months pa.)

* 1 used to attend most Sundays but is now prevented from doing so due to disability.

10 attend on a monthly basis.

* One return suggested their attendance at church had helped following bereavement.

Involvement

76% (35) recognised that they play, or have played, a special role in the life of St. Mark's.

Some people contributed to many areas of church life.

93% (43) were able to identify things they enjoyed doing in the life of the church.

Areas of involvement were as follows:

Involvement in worship (*reading, choir, music, intercessions, serving, preparation*) = 16

Social (*catering, coffee, fund raising*) = 12

Maintenance (*Fabric, cleaning, gardening*) = 4

Pastoral support = 4

Administration = 3

Community (*school & children's work*) = 3

Study Groups = 1

Magazine contributor = 1

* Other responses identified 'church services' & 'social events' as being enjoyable. * 26% (12) identified a sense of 'belonging', and the enjoyment that came through their friendship within the church.

* 28% (13) did not recognise that their gifts were being used, or felt that they had anything useful to contribute.

My ministry.....

The following areas were identified by church members as being their contribution (potential or realised) to the ministry of the Body of Christ:

- Personal example / Godly living
- Encouraging children & young people to join the church
- Listening
- Encouraging spirituality
- Personal Prayer
- Welcoming visitors
- Links with school & young people (*school move*)
- Offering pastoral care (*esp. via Occasional services*)
- Evangelism – *talking God with others*
- Healing ministry
- Helping & supporting those in need
- Being outward looking
- Offering encouragement / enthusiasm / commitment
- Puppet ministry
- Writing (*as outreach*)

Significant events in the life of St. Mark's

Loss of vicar	Appointment of Wendy
Weekly anthem introduced	Ill health of choir members
Health & Safety policy	New musical director
Links with school	Death of church members
Shared ministry in action – clergy team	New curates every 2 years
Interregnum experience	Lack of continuity (<i>variety of priests</i>)
More lay involvement	Women in ministry
Initiatives with children & young people	New vestry
Over 80 yrs: change - in churchmanship, Service style, Clergy, Fear of closure,	
New beginnings & thankfulness	
Installation of electric lighting / organ blower / gas heating / sound system / carpet	

Identified Strengths

Common responses were:

A dedicated Christian community of faith - welcoming, warm, supportive
Congregation work as a team
Friendships

Other responses included:

A building within the heart of the community	Rev. Wendy
Caring ministry	Open to ideas
Serving an area of low church attendance	Music – choir & organist
Good preaching	Attractive church
After church socialising	Links with St Mark's school
Building offers available space for peace & quiet	Garden
Determination to uphold tradition	

Areas of weakness

Common responses were:

Ageing congregation
Not enough active members
Lack of families & young people

Other responses included:

Old fashioned music	Taking things for granted
Small congregation	To be without a vicar
Not many Herston residents attend	No housegroups

Poor attendance at prayer meetings	No use of church library
Weak pastoral care	Lack of car parking
Resistance to change / new ideas	Lack of less formal worship
Family worship attracts some, while others stay away	
Service books difficult to follow for new worshippers / visitors	

Threats

Common responses were:

Relocation of school – can links be maintained?

Loss of church school

Dwindling congregation / fear of closure

Other responses included:

Being too inward looking

Lack of money

New Baptist church building

Lack of parking

Misunderstandings

Complacency

Opportunities

Common responses were:

Links with St. Mark's school

Messy church & other activities for children & parents

Other responses included:

Regaining the attendance of young people

Bringing housebound to church (taxi?)

Allowing church building for community use

Introducing monthly family worship (non Eucharistic)

Congregation size

Advantages

Enables caring

People know each other

Accepting

Friendly

Disadvantages

Viability

Near stagnation

Restricts growth / initiative

Inability to cope & manage change

Just enough people to keep going

Not enough income to meet diocesan demands

Age imbalance

More 'vocal' members can dominate

Discouraging (for clergy)

Words to describe life at St. Mark

Old	Encouraging	Friendly & welcoming
Enjoyable	Warm, caring, loving	Realistic
Faithful & committed	Close community	Fun loving
Happy	Tolerant / accepting	Great team
Generous	Much loved in Herston	Insular
Meaningful worship	marking time	Poor outreach
Forward looking	Stuck in a rut	Music
Family feeling	Uplifting	Compact, yet out-going
Keen	Honest	Comfortable & non-challenging

Reasons for worshipping at St. Mark's

Familiar

Good traditional choir & music

Family roots & links
Atmosphere
Meets personal needs
Challenging teaching
Liturgy (worship style)
Friendships
Parking (comparatively easy!)
Welcoming

Location – local church
Family feel / social interaction
Pastoral care
Non threatening
Feeling wanted
Size
Loyalty of members
variety of clergy – varied sermons

Creating community

Local church – centre of Herston community – ‘owned’ by community
Messy church, young people’s groups & links with school
Marking special occasions: incl. Baptisms, weddings & funerals
Pastoral work
Involvement within Team & contributing to church variety
Offering a warm welcome – a Christian centre for Herston
Fund raising for good causes
Open church & garden
Community based activities

Mission shaped church

Active in local community
Spreading Good News
Personal growth in faith to equip our outreach
Provide a listening ear
Active beyond Sundays
To have a vision, purpose & focus for the future
Demonstrate an alternative to the manic secular world
Offering fellowship & a place to learn about the Christian faith
Being a church without walls
“Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary use words” – St. Francis
September, 2011

Attract / value all age groups
Share Christ’s love
Churches working together
Stewards of our planet
Events / services with wide appeal
Active in prayer

Appendix Two

'Let Us Talk' – a churchwarden's response

What is the 'Personality and Character' of your local church?

St. Mark's is a fairly small but a warm and welcoming church. It is situated in the 'village' of Herston on the western outskirts of the town of Swanage. The local people who probably only attend the church for the 'three wheel' services, are intensely loyal to St. Mark's, having been used to attending school services whilst at the church school of St. Mark's immediately next door to the church. Although traditional in many aspects of worship, progression has been made in recent years in making some services more accessible to non churchgoers, an example would be the now monthly All Age Worship and a monthly Messy Church held on the school premises.

What are the priorities of your local church?

Many members of St. Mark's are in their latter years having attended the church for a great many years. They are intensely loyal but some do find change difficult. A younger membership will be needed to keep the church functioning and to work in the community as part of our Christian outreach. Therefore I believe that services have to be more attractive to the person who is not a regular church attender and who see church services as being a bit daunting and exclusive. St. Mark's has already started by having an All Age Worship once a month but I wonder if there could also be a Family Communion service once a month with a Sung Eucharist on the Sundays in between?

Is there one thing you would like to take on or develop in the coming year (recognising that may mean you may need to stop doing something else)?

Part of the problem at St. Mark's is that there is a lack of space for community activities. The church room is not large enough to hold functions, outreach events, a youth club and is not large enough for Messy Church to function in. I would like to see St. Mark's through the offices of the PCC, enter into negotiations with the Diocesan Education Secretary and the Board to take over a small part of St. Mark's School when the school moves to its new premises. If the negotiations were proved to be unworkable or too costly, then to further increase our 'space', perhaps St. Mark's might need to look at removing some pews from the rear of the church or to look at a wooden or a glass conservatory extension in the grounds of St. Mark's, with perhaps access for car parking coming through from part of the demolished school buildings in Jubilee Road.

Are there ways in which we can work together with neighbouring churches to achieve more?

A new Baptist church and community rooms has been constructed within walking distance from St. Mark's with a completion date soon and our former Priest, has been holding talks with the Baptist Minister to seek out ways that we could work together. A possible concern is that it might not result in a working partnership as they are a much larger congregation and their churchmanship is quite different. However relationships are good and it is to be hoped that some of our activities can be linked.

How can we best measure the quality and impact of church life?

When the local community see us as a resource, a place of refuge, of advice, of comfort. Not just somewhere that holds services on Sundays and the occasional baptism, wedding or funeral. As St. Mark's School moves to its new site, we must ensure that our close links are still maintained and even when their children move on to secondary schools that St. Mark's Church is still a central place in their thoughts and heart.

Margaret Chinchen