

Let Us Talk
A Response from the Four Parishes
of the United Benefice of Western Downland

St. George, Damerham - All Saints, Martin - St Andrew, Rockbourne - St. Leonard, Whitbsury

Responses to the 'Let us Talk' initiative have been received from members of the four PCCs. In some ways the responses should be seen as representing the view of individuals and individual congregations, but there was considerable overlap of themes, with many issues being common to all four parishes.

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

Responses indicate that our four churches seek to communicate our Christian faith and live out our Christian values through our shared life, as much as in our individual lives. As part of this a number of respondents variously described our congregations as open and welcoming to visitors, friendly and available to all, charming and with a warm personality.

However, one respondent - perhaps not alone in their view - said: 'The character of [this parish] looking from the "outside in" would be perceived as typical middle class England, comfortable in their routine.'

Another suggested their congregation was 'less a community than a group of people with common values and interests.'

The four churches of the benefice **share** many things in common, including a stipendiary priest, a local parish share formula and a shared worship pattern. They also share significant challenges, such as building maintenance, finance and small congregations. Each church has at least 2 services a month, but only some congregation members have embraced the opportunity to participate in services in other churches in the benefice when a service is not being held in their own village.

The parish churches are much-loved **historic buildings**, significant in their own right; in art and architecture. Their locations and peaceful setting, appearance, atmosphere and aesthetic beauty can all speak to people, even those who may not regard themselves as being particularly spiritual. They can evoke a sense of timelessness and solidity, an enduring presence in a fast paced and sometimes bewildering world. Each parish church has a unique story, shaped and reshaped by succeeding generations. Yet they also express a shared Christian heritage that has endured through the centuries. They are deep-rooted survivors, coping with change, some of it profound and significant.

However, they are also impeded by their history, suffering from isolation from the communities they serve, or difficult access, and lacking facilities which are expensive and difficult to provide.

They are **rural** churches and their worship and activities seeks to reflect and resonate with this. They are often a **focus of celebration and commemoration** for the wider community; bringing people together. They are - or should be - there for everyone. Sometimes this may need changes to be made to the fabric of the buildings to meet people's requirements. Such change needs to be well-considered and sensitive.

They are **small** churches, with rather sparse, largely ageing congregations of 'irregular' regulars, many of whom generally attend those services they particularly enjoy. Small attendances can adversely affect the dynamic of worship. Some respondents noted a different dynamic when the church is full for 'festival' occasions. Being a small church brings benefits and drawbacks (committed membership, intimate atmosphere, fewer human resources, financial pressures).

There are a significant number of parishioners who see themselves as participating in the life of our local churches, though they only infrequently attend services of worship. A number of these contribute to the life of the church in various ways (locking and unlocking, churchyard maintenance, flower rotas, cleaning, etc).

They are **worshipping communities**. Some (a significant number) prefer traditional forms, and see this continuity in worship and prayer as conveying dignity and possessing innate value. For a number of these, their outlook and values are also at times expressed in conservative terms, with Christian devotion and service

being regarded as essentially private affairs. At the same time they wish to see the Church at large speak with clarity and in accordance with what are regarded as traditional Christian values. One parishioner suggested a connection between this and 'the decrease in numbers in Sunday services.'

Some congregation members are resistant to innovation and change, believing that something precious may in the process be lost. Others wish to see significant change, and are frustrated with a church locally and at large which they feel risks becoming isolated from the values and interest of those around, and want to see the congregations get more involved in the life of the surrounding communities. This can produce tensions.

2. What are the priorities of your local church?

- To inspire growth in faith, together and out into the community.
- Seeking to make a distinctive contribution, around prayer, care and concern, to the wider community, particularly trying to be aware of those who can be overlooked.
- Improving facilities - a task already being tackled - in a variety of ways.
- Being good stewards of the church buildings and churchyards, and of the resources entrusted to us, including the responsibility to continue the care, repair and preservation of the fabric of an ancient building.
- Making ends meet.

3. Is there one thing you would like to take on in the coming year ...?

Achieving a single answer to this, even in one parish, was not straightforward. One respondent answered this question with a simple, 'No.' Another said: 'What could I take on? Not much more!'. There always seem to be new things that we have to, or feel we have to take on each year. One or two felt that too many different things are asked of us, or that we ask too much of ourselves with limited numbers and resources.

However, among the key priorities identified are:

- completing current planned development of the church buildings to make them more effective for contemporary use
- raising funding to cover the cost of this work and
- reaching a stable financial position in our current accounts.

Achieving these alone is a big ask, as one respondent (surely not the only one) noted that core members are 'doing their fair share and more' and describes the present state of affairs as 'hand to mouth'.

Despite this there were a number of ideas for a priority within the four PCCs.

- A survey to find out what people need and want from us.
- To arrange events of general interest for villagers, not simply to make income for the church, but to socialise and discover where help may be needed.
- A focus on families and young people.
- Become less compartmentalised by getting more involved **with** the surrounding community **in** the surrounding community.
- Making the most of 'festival opportunities' (e.g. services that are attractive to the wider community, such as Harvest, Songs of Praise, Blessing of Animals, etc), bringing people together, which may require change within the church structure to allow this to happen.
- Increasing the social element of 'fellowship' around refreshments after services.
- Encouraging more unity and co-operation between people of different denominations and congregations.
- Being more aware of, and making more use of senior clergy, diocesan resources and events, workshops at the cathedral, etc.
- Focussing on those who are suffering: the elderly living on their own, families struggling to survive in this economic climate. One respondent wrote: 'To organize [church] its life in such a way as to help people

who are less fortunate in our local Community... Never give up on people. Any number of experiences have led me to believe that you can help people, by being there when they most need you.'

4. Are there ways in which we can work together to achieve more?

It was felt that there are ways in which we can work together more collaboratively to be more effective and achieve more (though some felt that this was best expressed at the local (parish) level), More could be achieved by sharing ideas within and across PCCs and congregations, working more as a team. Some noted the value of deanery relationships, for example in developing stronger links with the Sudan. Apart from the Anglican churches, few congregations remain locally, but the pursuit of meaningful co-operation between Christians of different traditions was still felt to be important. One respondent noted that co-operation has never been easy, but writes: 'All the years I have lived in the village, unity has been very difficult. We just have to pursue the vision.'

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

The quality of church life is difficult to measure in a quantifiable way. It cannot simply be measured by the number of people going to church on a given Sunday, though a number of respondents would like to see numbers increase, noting that too few people are managing too many demands. A healthier congregation in numbers would be able to imagine and do more.

To measure the quality and impact we must look for signs of people valuing the Christian values we promote., and of our being effective in bringing comfort to those in need, as well as whether we perceive change for the better in our own attitudes and actions. Despite frailties and failings, these things are evident in our four churches, but much of it is immeasurable in statistical terms.

As a caution to grand schemes one respondent noted that effectiveness 'require[s] more than rhetoric.'

At the same time statistical data - accurately recorded - can have a value, and it was suggested by one respondent that we could set ourselves measurable targets as PCCs.

Another respondent suggested that by reaching out into the community, a positive response would hopefully be reflected in [a measurable] greater involvement by a broader section of the community. Another respondent suggested that the quality and impact of church life may be measured by the depth and continuity of support that the local congregation enjoys from the wider community, and by the enthusiasm of the local community to be involved in the full range of church life, from flower arranging, church cleaning, sidesman duties, working parties, children's choral activity and by church support of the local school.

one respondent noted that: 'Over the years, religious people have been responsible for the poor and the sick and a lot of religious people in our community contribute to our society and adhere to this in their religious principles. This is a major impact of church life. We all turn to the Church, during times of need!'

The fact that we seek to continue to serve in these ways is of enduring importance, as one respondent said:

'I'm not sure how to answer this, but hope visitors and villagers alike will take on board [our] love and dedication, as we are all equal in God's eyes.'