

'Let us Talk' – Response from Wimborne Minster

The responses to the questions below are based on work done in March this year with the Minster PCC. We spent the day together to reflect, discuss, worship and pray as we seek to discern God's way forward for the Minster in the coming 3-5 years. For a fuller sense of what is already going on at the Minster; of current projects; and a vision for the future, please see the accompanying 'Rector's Report', delivered at our recent APCM on April 18th 2013.

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

The Minster combines the desire to be a 'normal' parish church with a distinctive and historic ministry to the wider civic communities of Wimborne and East Dorset. As such, it can sometimes appear slightly schizophrenic! At its best, it is prayerful, caring, hospitable, generous and inclusive, benefiting from the gifts of able lay people, professional musicians, an iconic building and the affection of the local community. It has a certain 'respectability' which is inviting to many and can be off-putting to others, but on the whole it succeeds in enabling those who come through its doors – whether pilgrim or visitor – to sense something of the hospitality of God. It enjoys high standards in worship and seeks excellence, but not at the expense of warmth. The downside of these many outward strengths is that its 'internal' relationships can sometimes suffer, and people within the congregation can, from time to time, be argumentative and critical in an unconstructive way.

Whilst many people come to the Minster, it is not inward-looking and exercises a considerable pastoral ministry in the community, especially to the elderly, the housebound and the bereaved. It has a strong social awareness and environmental conscience, reflected in its active 'Greenbelt' Group, Environment Group, Eco-congregation and Fairtrade statuses as well as its regular charitable giving. Members of the congregation are involved, day to day, in a wide range of groups and volunteering roles with charitable and other organisations in the area.

2. What are the priorities of your local church?

Our priorities emerge out of our core values, recently affirmed as:

- God loves us all and is central to our lives
- God wants us to respect, value and love one another
- God wants us to be welcoming ambassadors who speak into the community and who are inclusive of all who seek him
- God wants us to communicate the Christian faith
- God wants us to work together

There is a clear desire to be outward-looking and to serve the community. However, there is the need for some serious 'housekeeping' as well – both in respect of relationships within the Minster community; and in putting in place financial and administrative structures to maintain the Minster 'machine' effectively for the sake of mission. At present, far too much energy is directed *inward* which could and should be directed *outward*. Enabling the healing of relationships and the setting in place of a secure administration is therefore a priority, not as an end in itself, but in order to release people for mission, so that the Kingdom may be more effectively built in Wimborne. One significant – and potentially long term – aspect of this mission is to explore the possibility of a purpose-built Visitor Centre adjacent to the Minster grounds in order not only to serve visitors, pilgrims and the Minster congregation, but also to serve the needs of the town and wider community.

3. 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?)

Current projects include a broad review of our communications – both internal and external. This is looking at printed, electronic and visual communications (including internal and external signage) with a view to a) redeveloping the website and introducing social media; b) designing and developing a ‘Minster brand’ for easy recognition in all our communications; and c) paving the way for enhanced educational and artistic exploitation of the Minster building and its historic resources.

We are also re-shaping and developing our work with baptism families and marriage couples in order to bring about more cross-generational interaction (e.g. linking present members of the congregation with new families; and the training of three Minster couples to assist in marriage preparation days). We also hope that this will help to create a ‘critical mass’ of younger couples within the worshipping (and social) life of the Minster.

We have recently successfully negotiated a change in pattern of services (Matins now only on one Sunday each month instead of three; ‘Family Service’ brought to an end and re-integrated into the regular pattern of Minster worship). This will reduce the number of services on a Sunday and release clergy and lay leaders to be more involved in developing informal worship in the Minster.

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

The Minster enjoys good relationships with other churches in the town borne out in seasonal worship together through the year. A recent example of collaborative working has been the establishment of a Foodbank in Wimborne to serve those in need. The Minster has also developed (and is piloting) a Voucher Scheme for the homeless to enable them to acquire a hot meal and drink at three local outlets in the town. We plan to invite other Wimborne churches to join the Scheme later in the year.

We are also pleased to be working more closely with St John’s, Wimborne and St Mary’s, Ferndown in specialist training and education for Lay Pastoral Assistants, having recently hosted a conference on dementia. Our Oasis Bereavement Group is pleased to offer support, where requested, across the Deanery.

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

The simple answer might be to say: ‘Lives changed; people coming to faith; church communities growing in numbers and depth.’ In one sense, that is what we hope to see. And yet there is, I believe, a calling for the Church to be faithful for the sake of what remains invisible; to go on serving the poor even when we cannot ‘measure’ the effectiveness of what we offer. The greatest impact of church life is, surely, through the lives of those whom we seek to feed spiritually week by week, year by year, as they live out their lives amongst their families, friends and communities. We will never be able to measure the impact of that – and perhaps we should not try. For it is *God’s* work, not ours or even theirs.

That said, Wimborne is a place where people’s affection for the Church – and for the Minster in particular – is tangible. Whilst we should never take it for granted, for as long as people respond to what we are doing within the community – whether by writing about it in the local press; or talking about it in the Square; or joining in events on the Minster Green; or coming to the Minster to sit quietly and light a candle; or simply ‘turning up’ at Christmas or Easter – then I believe that church life is having some impact on people’s lives. There is always more we could be doing – especially in our work amongst children and young people. But God will always be at work in his world – in spite of the Church. Our privilege is simply to be channels for his grace.

Vanessa Herrick April 2013