

Vicar's Report: All Saints' Church, Putney Common. AGM March 13th 2011

Last September I stood in this church at my service of licensing and induction as your vicar, and looked out at hundreds of people; there was no room for them all. Some went home because they couldn't get in! There could not have been another vicar in the Church of England who felt more supported and welcomed than I did that day. Now, I guess I'm about to cash in some of the promises in the applause, which went on for an unseemly length of time (*the Archdeacon whispered in my ear 'tell them to stop now' my response was 'certainly not!'*).

I've been at All Saints' for about nine months. Christmas has come and gone, and now we're in Lent and knocking on the door of Holy Week and Easter. We have a splendid New Team rector in Ailsa Newby; she is a firm pair of hands on the tiller of a parish that is changing rapidly. I discover new and admirable things about her week by week, and I am privileged to work with her.

I chaired the AGM last year, and wrote the report, which I concluded like this:

*'I have no doubt that the Parish of Putney, and All Saints' in particular, is heading for a great future. These are exciting times for all of us, and a bit disconcerting too. I know that a very warm welcome awaits our new vicar, whoever he or she may be. There's a lot of work to do but there is a huge amount to **work with**... and a lot of love to oil the wheels!'*

I remember this time last year my leg was in a cast after a skiing disaster, and I had to do everything sitting on a bar stool! Little did you (or I) know that it would be me standing here a year on, being that 'New Vicar'. As I'm told they say all the time these days in Washington DC, '...be careful what you wish for!'

It's my job now to look at where we are as a church, to look at the direction we're travelling in, and to make some suggestions about what we might do to help us along the way.

It is so easy to praise all Saints'; we do so well in many ways. We are in a privileged position; we have a beautiful building, in a beautiful setting, and we have a large and growing congregation of friendly people. We have skilled people who give of their time to make the whole ship sail. We have a thriving church school and a supportive pastoral network. All of this is a delight, but it also throws up challenges. We need to welcome people quickly, and enable them to find a place to grow and connect within our church community. Open doors and open hearts are not enough if communication is closed and not connected; it needs to be frequent and ongoing.

We average about 40 Baptisms a year in all Saints'; many are local people with only a loose connection to the church. We perform about 12 weddings a year, and likewise we need to help and encourage these people to become more involved in Christian life and worship. This needs a return to first principles... because the vocabulary of Christianity is no longer common, and church-going is alien to many.

We have a particular kind of church. In many ways it's very 'Church of England'. On the one hand it could be called 'high Church'. We are rightly proud of our liturgy and worship. Our Choir is excellent and our reputation for music of a very high standard spreads across the Parish day by day. Our monthly singing of 'Evensong' becomes increasingly popular, and rightly so.

We also foster a reputation for being a liberal, open and generous Anglican church, and we are a flagship to many in the wider church. We are sometimes prophets. We open our doors to extend a welcome to everyone, particularly to those whom parts of the church want to exclude. We are not a community that demands doctrinal purity.

We try to tell the Christian story in a way that is honest about its grey areas; all of this is so important. There are enough conservative, exclusive, self satisfied, self righteous (or 'right like us!') churches around; we don't need another one. There are enough dull churches too, and we don't need to add to them. It's important to me that our 'unique selling point' is maintained and celebrated. It is the reason why many people find a home here. I like to think that the applause at my licensing was as much for the inclusivity I stand for, as it was for me.

I hope that we can continue to be a bit edgy. To talk Christianity in a different way and be recognisably traditional but not beholden to one particular interpretation of the Bible or doctrine, so allowing people to come to God with their doubts as well as certainties.

This has to be reflected in all of our work; it begins with our children. We have a thriving Sunday School and I have to thank those who lead it for their amazing hard work. We introduced Godly play last year. Here we teach children the Christian Faith through story; it teaches adults too. Christianity isn't a moral highway code or set of preordained formulaic beliefs. It is a story that we enter into, and we discover how to use the story to interpret our lives.

In order for us to flourish as the big church we are (and I believe we will get bigger) we need every member to be committed to our mission and ministry. We need people to

lead and not just follow; I am only one person in this adventure. In the Church of England we have a Biblical view of the priesthood of all believers. In our congregation we need more leaders to head up projects and see them to fruition without the Vicar. We have Sunday School leaders and pastoral care leaders, but we don't have enough of them and people are reluctant to come forward. We don't have enough people being ministers of the Gospel.

Yes, we need people to do coffee and run social events and sit in on the crèche. We need committee members and money men and women, we need stewards and key holders and servers and sacristans, but we also need non ordained people to learn how to teach and foster Christians in smaller, identifiable groups.

There is so much that we do, and much we could do. There is the ongoing problem of busyness. Busy people are always the people to ask because they are good at multitasking, and yet I am aware that busyness is both a blessing and a curse in a church. We do need to share out what needs to be done more evenly, and not leave the responsibility to a relatively small number of people.

We are not short of talent. Musical, dramatic, administrative, pastoral, educational, financial; all can be used in the service of the Gospel. If we can do it, it will be the secret to our success.

All this and money too! We can't hide from the fact that we spend more than we contribute. We will all need to examine our financial commitment to the ministry of our church otherwise we can't move anywhere but backwards. We'll be hearing much more about an initiative to address our giving very soon.

Now I want to celebrate what we are, and I want to thank the many people who help to make our church 'happen'.

Thanks to all those who give of their time in whatever capacity. Thanks to all those who managed the interregnum with only a one legged priest to call upon. Thanks to Sarah and those who work with our children and those who care for the elderly; those who sing and serve and set up for our worship; those who run our ever growing 'Mums and Toddler groups'; those who manage our money and serve on our committees; our church wardens, Iain and Gerald, and soon to be Clemancy; Carolyn, who is my right hand and strong rock without whom I would cease to function; our stewards and our flower arrangers; our Parish Action group, maintenance and activity organisers; our choir, Cameron and Alison, and members young and old.

There are many things coming up in the future. Our exploratory plans to expand the Parish of Putney into a 4 churches team, including All Saints', St Mary's, St Margaret's and Holy Trinity Roehampton, are about to reach the recommendation stage. In addition, our committee constitution is about to be brought in line with the usual practice of the Church of England; all managed by Ailsa Newby.

We plan to introduce new services for children and younger teenagers at All Saints' later in the year on Sundays at 4.00pm. This is an attempt to give children their own worship space, and to capture people who perhaps find Sunday mornings difficult to attend for whatever reason, including mini rugby and 6 aside football, horse riding and sleepovers!

There are plans to recruit new staff members to help; perhaps a new assistant priest; perhaps a new pastoral assistant. Both these would lead and develop lay ministry, particularly with young people, at All Saints' and across the parish.

I'm not at all sure how we're going to do this in these deprived and economically barren times, but I think God has a few ideas, so I'm listening at the moment!

Am I tired? Yes.

Am I short of time? Yes.

Are we short of money? Yes.

Do I think we can achieve our potential? Yes.

Do I believe in all of you? Absolutely.

Am I happy? Most certainly.

Thank you for this year. And God Bless you.

With Love and Prayers

Chris Eyden