

Christ the King 2011

Address for 8+9.30 service: introducing 7 marks of a healthy church

Today is the introduction to the '7 marks of a healthy church' sermon series which will continue over a few weeks leading up to, and then following, Christmas. I was in the Christian Bookshop in Cambridge recently, and I saw a book called 'the 9 marks of a healthy church'!

Obviously there has been some inflation going on!! Anyway, we're sticking with 7.

So, who decided what these 'marks of a healthy church' were?

The full account may be found in the book 'The healthy churches' handbook, by Canon Robert Warren. Robert Warren was team rector of one of the largest and fastest growing churches in England: St Thomas Crookes in the 1970s and 80s, and was on the Archbishop of Canterbury's Spring Board evangelism initiative in the 1990s.

Warren refers to research that was undertaken in one diocese in the 1990s. In a five year period, overall attendance had dropped by 16%. Yet, in 25% of the churches in that diocese, there had been growth in attendance of 16%. These churches were clearly 'bucking the trend' and research was undertaken to find out why those churches had grown while others declined.

What emerged showed that these churches varied enormously. They were:

- Not all larger or charismatic/evangelical churches
- Not all comfortable churches in middle-class leafy suburbs
- Not all UPA parishes generously funded from the Church Urban Fund
- Not all led by the youngest, most visionary, enthusiastic and able clergy.

In fact these 'growing' churches ranged across all social settings, and church traditions. All church sizes were equally represented, and led by a good cross-section of ages, personality types and leadership styles. So, the good news was that no context, no size of church, no church tradition, and no leadership style seemed closed to the possibility of significant growth.

These churches were invited to a day together, in Durham, to try to identify what things they were each doing that contributed to growth rather than decline. From that day, and subsequent research in other dioceses, came what are now called the '7 marks of a healthy church'

But what do we mean by a 'healthy church'?

The normal understanding of 'growth' is connected to churches that experience numerical growth. But Robert Warren is at pains to point out that the term 'healthy churches' is being used in the sense of nurturing the life of the church, as one would speak of growing a healthy rose bush. So, it isn't solely a matter of numerical growth.

Warren also points out that 'health' is being used as a translation of the Biblical concept of 'salvation': namely wholeness, balance and harmony with God in all creation. Christ frequently said to people whom he healed, 'your faith saved you'. Also translated sometimes as 'made you well' or 'made you whole'. So a healthy church is one that has been touched and energised by the presence of God. A place that reflects something of the good news of the wholeness that comes through knowledge of God, as revealed in Christ, by the Holy Spirit.

So seven particular insights marked out these healthy churches: They weren't simply organisations, but loving communities. They enabled personal relationships, often expressed in small groups. The marks were summed up

as a set of values and goals rather than merely activities - if you prefer - they were as much about 'who they were' and 'what they aimed to become' as 'what they did'.

Common characteristics

From the Durham day, and refined by work since, came seven characteristics, or marks, of healthy churches:

1. *Energised by faith*: at the heart of these churches is a real awareness of the presence, goodness and love of God.
2. *An outward-looking focus*: Not merely concerned about themselves, but caring practically for their community and the world.
3. *Seeks to find out what God wants*: Prayerfully on the move, rather than stuck in a dull repetition of past assumptions and patterns.
4. *Faces the cost of change and growth*: They faced hard truths and were prepared to make real changes that were often costly.
5. *Operates as a community*: real and honest relationships that makes church a 'family' for all who participate
6. *Makes room for all* – not just at services but in the life of the church.
7. *Does a few things and does them well*: they are not rushing around madly but enjoying what they do, and seeing positive results.

So this will be our sermon series.

Why it's worth doing at St Mary's.

There has been a living church here for nearly 800 years. I'd like to think that we can nurture our church community, feeling God's Spirit guiding us and strengthening us, so that we do not merely work hard to manage decline. Instead, I hope we can together identify how to direct our efforts, under God, to do more of those things that mark out 'healthy churches' and be a place where there is growth and life. That will be a real cause for celebration when St Mary's marks its 800th birthday.

Let us pray the 'Living God's love' prayer

Living God's Love

Living God

Draw us deeper into your love;

Jesus our Lord, send us to care and serve

Holy Spirit, make us heralds of good news.

Stir us, strengthen us, teach and inspire us to live your love

with generosity and joy, imagination and courage;

for the sake of your world and

in the name of Jesus.

Amen.