

FIFTH MARK OF A HEALTHY CHURCH OPERATES AS A COMMUNITY 15.01.12

Those of you who have been in church regularly during the last month will know that Richard, Ngozi, Michael and I have been sharing with you some of the marks of a healthy church.

Very briefly so far we have spoken about

The church being energised by faith.

Having an outward looking focus.

Seeking to find out what God wants.

Facing the cost of change and growth

Continuing with that topic I will be focusing today on the fifth mark of a healthy church where we think of the church operating as a community.

So what do we mean by community?

Sometimes we tend to think of communities as groups of people living in close proximity to one another.

But you can actually live in close proximity to other people yet not be part of a community.

Rather a community is made up of a group of people who work together in such a way that endeavours to seek ways which will benefit all.

The research which was carried out involving many churches showed that churches which sought to work as communities were among those where growth was seen and faith was strengthened.

If a church is working as a community the members will constantly be aware of each others needs and show compassion and kindness to each other.

Think again of that passage from Ephesians that was read.

We hear St Paul encouraging the church in Ephesus “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which they had been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

It would indeed be wonderful if Christian communities could actually live in this way!

This doesn't mean that there will be no disagreements but such disagreements will be dealt with in an open and sensible manner always endeavouring to understand the other's point of view without feeling you are being got at.

Because if anything is going to deter new people from wanting to become part of a Christian fellowship it is the witnessing of complaining and grumbling behind people's backs!

If a community is functioning true to its nature then it will be a place where relationships are nurtured often in small groups so that people are helped to grow in faith and service.

There will be a strong sense of fellowship among the members not only within the church building although this is important but also in the way that people relate to one another as they leave the building and allow that sense of well being to become part of their daily living.

Being part of the Christian community should be something very special where members take delight in coming together to worship a God who loves them with such an intensity which we human beings find incredibly difficult to understand.

If we Christians, and I am not just thinking of our community here in St Mary's, look on our presence in church as something we do if we can fit it in with our other activities then we are losing out on what God wants to give us. Not only that, but we are giving the wrong message to those who would like to become part of our Christian fellowship.

If our Christian faith means anything to us at all then barring illness we should give top priority to the times we can worship with our fellow Christians.

Any Christian community should endeavour to be constantly working as a team in every aspect.

This means that use should be made of everyone's skills and people should be encouraged to take on roles of leadership where possible.

Newcomers will then sense that we all have parts to play in the building up of our church community and will themselves have less fear in offering their services where their talents can be used.

The wonderful thing about being a part of the Christian community is the realisation that God loves each one of us just as we are. Of course we all know that God loves us too much to allow us to stay as we are.

We do not have to jump through hoops to merit God's love and similarly we don't have to jump through hoops to become part of the Christian community either here or anywhere else.

Nor should we expect other people to.

And it's this sense of knowing that they are being welcomed into a community where great importance is placed on truly worshipping a great God and where they themselves are made to feel important, which will attract and hold on to newcomers.

And of course this in turn has a knock on effect in that as people are truly welcomed into our Christian communities they will be more than ready to spread the good news to others.

As new people come in they will naturally want to know more about the Christian faith and so there should be provision for the sharing and teaching of our faith.

There are many ways that this can be done, one of the ways being Alpha which many churches run throughout the year as we do here in St Mary's.

If you haven't yet picked up the Alpha News from the table by the door I do encourage you to do so. There are many encouraging accounts of people's lives being turned around after having attended an Alpha Course.

I would like to leave you with a question to think about.

How do we here in St Mary's measure up to being a Christian Community?

I think there are many things we do well but I also feel there are things we could do better.

I have here a box which has been on the table for the last four weeks waiting for people to put in it their vision for the future of St Mary's.

Alas it remains empty!

Does that mean that no one has a vision for the future of our Christian community here?

Can I remind you that in Proverbs we are told that "Where there is no vision the people perish."

Do we really want St Mary's Church to become another of the many redundant churches throughout the country?

I'm going to put the box back again and I along with Richard, Ngozi, and Michael would appreciate any comments you care to make about our way forward here in St Mary's.

We really do need to know what your thoughts are.

Let us pray.

Living God, teach us that, whatever we have learned about you and however established our faith may be, there is still more to discover and further to grow. Open our life then, to new horizons through Christ our Lord. Amen.