

## 'SEVEN MARKS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH'

### *"6<sup>TH</sup> Makes Room for All"*

As a part of our Mission Action Planning we have been thinking about the seven marks or indicators of a healthy church. The aim is to focus our minds on the future life and direction of St. Mary's. First, we explored how God energizes our faith. Then, we thought about having an outward focus. We were reminded that it is essential that we understand what God wants and that we face the cost of change and growth.

Two weeks ago we explored how the Church should operate as a community rather than functioning as a club or religious organisation. Today's mark follows very similar themes namely, that the Church Makes room for all being inclusive rather than exclusive. It's possible to just think we know this and that we are open and welcoming to everyone, but, perhaps, it would be useful to step back and think about this aspect of our mission a little more closely.

Do we really welcome newcomers and go out of our way to include them in the life of the church? How do we help children, young people and enquirers to belong, to contribute and be nurtured in their faith? Are our different social and ethnic backgrounds, mental and physical abilities, and our diverse ages celebrated as well as seen as a strength.

We have all read in the Gospels how Jesus went out of his way, even to breaking down the usual rules and expectations, to show His concern for His followers and friends, men, women, children, the poor, the despised, the hurt, the diseased, and the sinful. No one was rejected or ignored. Jesus' love for people is good news for everyone. His message is for all people in and from every nation. Each one of us has an opportunity to respond to Him in faith and then to show His love to others.

Our welcome to newcomers should extend to beyond those who look, dress and think like us, who say the right things, share our attitudes, who will fit in without rocking the boat. Our shared ministry of welcome should be costly as it means making others part of our life, allowing the warmth of the friendships we enjoy to be taken, broken open, blessed and given to others with whom the only thing we may feel we have anything in common is our faith in Christ.

I believe the Church can and should breakdown some of the barriers that exist between the generations, which prevent them from relating to one another. These often self imposed obstacles also prevent the growth of mutual understanding and respect. We do not want to develop some sort of ghetto mentality.

Churches sometimes express a desire to have more young people. However, this often means that children and young people should join us in what we are already doing, but staying quiet and attentive whilst the adults do their thing.

Maybe we have got this the wrong way round. Perhaps, we should start by finding ways to attract those in their 60's and 50's. Once we start getting some results we can move on to ask the same question about how we can welcome and nurture the 40 year olds. By the time we have embraced

the 30 year olds we will be having to cope, more naturally I would suggest, with the teenagers and young people who will come along.

We should be open and eager to greet those who are unsure of their faith, who are searching for meaning, wanting to make sense of their lives. As the people of God we need to be ready to share our experiences, both our discoveries and our doubts, so that others can come alongside us and not feel they are inadequate or, to use a rather old fashioned word, unworthy.

Of course we live in a diverse society made up of many cultures, abilities and talents each with a value and with something to offer to the church. The people of God are called to be a community held together by the love of God and one another rather than by any limited socially shared background we might have in common. Churches that are able to embrace such diversity are more likely to grow simply because there are more doors through which people can enter the life of the church.

We may not know all the answers to these dilemmas and they may make us feel a little un-easy, but that is the start of a long process if we really want to develop a church that grows, that has a future, a place of worship and fellowship in our lives and in our communities.

You may say that we have heard this all before and the prophecies of doom have not quite, yet come to pass. However, it has to be asked why are other churches, not so far away, changing because they are growing. There exists a real hunger in people to explore their faith, to have a spiritual dimension in their lives and to discover Jesus Christ. For the love of God and the example of Jesus Christ has not changed. Christ still embraces all people whoever, whatever, wherever.

If we are seen as being old fashioned, cosy, middle class, full of cliques and double standards, despite our protests, then we will fail in our mission to live out and proclaim the love of Christ. If our walls are just used to protect us and our threshold a stumbling block then people will walk on by, without giving us a second glance and we should not be surprised or upset when people look and go elsewhere.

Let us not rest on our laurels, or give up because the task seems too great, but face the world and continue to explore how we might relate to the people around us. May we create opportunities and turn them into our strengths. On Thursday the church celebrates Candlemas when traditionally candles to be used in church were blessed. May the church in Goldington be a candle, a beacon, of light and hope in this dark and confused world. May we spread God's love and warmth from this place to all people.

Let us pray

*May the door of our Church be wide enough to receive all who need human love and friendship.*

*May it welcome all who have cares to unburden, thanks to express, hopes to nurture.*

*May the door of this place be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.*

*May its threshold be no stumbling block to young, old or uncertain feet.*

*May it be too high to admit complacency, selfishness, harshness or prejudice.*

*May this place be, for all who enter, the doorway to God's eternal Kingdom.*

**Amen.**