



“In Touch” Issue no. 6 Easter Season 2014



Holding on to what God sends us.

As most of you know, we struggled to find two people willing to take on the responsibility of being churchwardens for the coming year. We are grateful to Chris Hjelt for being willing to offer himself as our sole warden for 2014-15. I am sure that you also join me in extending your thanks and prayers to the five members of our church who have agreed to be Deputy Wardens: Helen Green, Andrew Jelly, Fred Padley, Jane Preston, and Frances Tyler. Deputy Wardens are used in some other churches in Bedford deanery and they help to share the oversight of church life with the Vicar and Wardens, deputising for the Church Warden(s) by agreement and maintaining good contact with one another.

We are currently sharing out tasks among these people, but there remain a number of other responsibilities which we shall need to assign to other members of our church in Goldington. I hope that anyone approached will ask themselves what they can do to help with the task, rather than finding reasons to refuse.

This brings me onto my main concern, as expressed in the title of this current ‘In Touch’ newsletter. Looking around the church during Easter Sunday, it was good to see the church well attended- with nearly 200 people at the 8am and 9.30 services that day. But imagine if these people came every week, or even twice a month? And what of our visitors, week by week, at other times of the year? What of those ‘on the margins’ of church life who would regard themselves as members of St Mary’s, but whose names would not be known to many of the ‘regular’ congregations? What of the many hundreds of Goldington people who come for the ‘Occasional Offices’ of the church (Weddings, Baptisms, and Funerals)? If even *ten per cent* of these began to attend church regularly, and were encouraged to grow in faith, we would see steady growth in our church.

Before you leap to assume I’m only thinking of ‘younger’ people, let me assure you to the contrary. My concern is for us to hold onto more of *all those* who come through the doors of the church. For many younger people who may live far from family, or have broken family relationships, it is really important to find people of the age of their parents, and grandparents, who have a wealth of life experience, time and patience, and who know Jesus Christ as their Lord. For those coping with the demands of young children, or indeed children at school and college, it can be such a boon to find others who are ‘fellow travellers’ in their life experience. For people further on in their careers, it is good to meet others who have similar life styles, and with whom they sense some fellow understanding. For older people, whether couples and those on their own (single, divorced, separated, widowed) it can be a huge health benefit- emotionally, spiritually, physically, to find people to join with for worship and other activities. Church should offer a place to belong, a place of community.

So how do we set about doing that? Well, my observation on the last year or more is that most people find us to be a ‘welcoming’ church. Well done to our ‘Welcome Teams’ for all they do. Yet research shows that while this aspect is undoubtedly important (few of us would persevere long in going to a new place where we did not feel welcome) more *needs to be done in order for visitors and occasional*

worshippers to be drawn into closer relationship within the church. A good deal of thought-provoking research can be found at the site www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk

Our vision, set in 2012, was to be a growing church. One of our goals for that year 2012-13 was 'to learn from local churches that are growing, so that we start to deal with our decline, and are no longer perceived as an ageing church.'

We all have a part to play in achieving that, so I'd like to invite everyone reading this letter to ask themselves these questions:

1. Is there anyone sitting near to me whose name I don't know? Why shouldn't I introduce myself? (There are people who've been worshipping together for decades who still don't know one another's names!) What's the worst that can happen?
2. Is there someone who appears unfamiliar with church, who might appreciate a little befriending-help with finding their way around our service book, perhaps to be offered a church magazine? Is our concern 'not to put them off' masking our own fear of change?
3. Do I smile at people? Someone observed to me that smiles seemed to be in short supply at St Mary's. We might come to church with all sorts of inner emotions, but let's not be afraid to show a smile when we greet others- and not simply those in 'our circle'.
4. Do I do anything to welcome families with younger children who sit near me, or do I regard them as something to put up with? (Sheila Berry relates how she persisted in attending St Mary's as a young mum- mainly due to friendliness from the late Ivy Smith. Had that friendship not been shown, we might never have enjoyed Sheila's ministry as a reader all those years later!)
5. Is there anyone who seems to be 'on their own' who might appreciate a warm and gentle invitation to come with me to the hall for coffee? (And without asking, you'll never know!) Am I prepared to stay with them, and introduce them to one or two other people while over there?
6. Have I politely asked for a name and contact number, to be able to invite that person to one of the church's activities? (leisure activities such as craft or walking or breakfasts, or volunteering including church cleaning teams, grounds clear ups, Foodbank, Flower arranging- or one of our Home Groups, Prayer Fellowship, and so on.)
7. Could I put them in touch with one of the ministry team (Readers and clergy) if they want some help or advice, and stay with them until they have been introduced?
8. Can I 'adopt' one or two new people? Research shows that unless people new to church form several significant relationships within a very few weeks, they cease to attend.

Each of us can do something to help in this. And let us not forget Jesus words in Matthew 25 vv31-46- and note particularly his warning "I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me" It's time to stir ourselves to be actively kind and concerned, to step outside the habits some of us have built up over such a long time, and to play our individual part in being a welcoming church, so that we value and hold onto those whom God sends us. Then we shall see a flourishing church, and encourage new people to grow in faith and love in the body of Christ in Goldington.

With my love and prayers

Richard