



“In Touch” Issue no. 8 January 2015



During 2015 I shall celebrate 20 years since my ordination as a priest in the Church of England. There will be a special service to mark that on Sunday 27th September 2015, when the Bishop of Bedford will be our guest preacher.

I have shared with the PCC my thoughts about a number of items which should be achievable as a way of marking that special year. They would all, I believe, enhance the mission of our church, and be within our MAP aims to build a growing church, and to maximise the use of our buildings. I'd like to summarise these below:

1. **Open the Church During the Day.** Ben, Brian and Chris Hjelt and I attended an informative and inspiring day run by the Diocese on making the most of your church buildings. At this event we learned that Ecclesiastical Insurance now advise that churches which are open during the day are less at risk of being burgled/vandalised because the perpetrators are less assured of being undisturbed. Obviously we'd need to set up a 'church watch' system, but a rota of varied visits might be effective. Attenders at Morning Prayer could open at 9am Mon-Friday, and we'd need to think about the procedure at weekends. I suggest that the church could be shut before schools come out. We might need a rota for that.

Do you share my longing for our church to be open to the community, available to anyone who just wants to drop in to think and pray?

2. **Prayer Stations** within the 'Memorial Chapel'. I have long wanted, as vicar, to see this space used creatively for personal prayer, with a range of resources, and a place to light a candle, to proclaim that prayer is really important in our building. Katherine and I would like to give a votive candle stand for that area in memory of my father Stanley Howlett and mother Betty and Katherine's father Revd Canon John Lowe (two of whom we lost in 2013)
3. **Provision for older children** However, there is also the matter of provision for children older than those who congregate in the new area under the balcony. Families with babies and toddlers enjoy that area, but I observe that-particularly on 2nd and 4th Sundays -there is a demand for an area where children can do worksheets and other activities related to faith if they prefer not to sit with their families. As Part of our MAP goals we must not lose a **dedicated area for older children** if we develop the 'Memorial chapel' to include wider prayer uses. As part of our thinking 'in the round' about our church building, I need that to be taken into account.
4. One of the attractive ideas we saw at the Barton day was the use of **well-designed glass doors** which can enable passers-by to see into the church, so that they do not see an apparently locked door. If for example our porch were glassed in, we could leave our fine old wooden door in place, but open. That is so much more inviting. Surely we don't want our church to be thought to be 'closed', or people afraid to come in once worship has begun. (As happened for example around Christmas)
5. **Permanent siting for our projector and screens** When I first came here as Vicar, a multi-media projector was declared to be a 'wish-list' item. Through prayer, and the goodwill of our local councillors, we were given the money to buy one, and it has been used in church, by church and connected voluntary organisations ever since. However, it is quite a lot of work to set it up for use, including arranging the portable screen. Many churches -including the 'conservative country parish' where we have worshipped while visiting Katherine's uncle and aunt in Northern Ireland- have installed **fixed screens** onto which hymns, information and notices are projected as a normal aid to worship. Isn't it time we joined them, and many other churches, in 'moving with the times'?

Like any new idea it takes some thinking through, but the question is whether we want, as we declared in our MAP, to be a growing church. Younger people would regard this as a normal provision. Again we'd have to take advice, explore what would work in our particular geography, but I hope we'll all be willing to look at the potential this could have to enhance worship and other meetings in church, , rather than resisting such a change in principle.

5. **A hospitality area at the back of the church.** I have growing concern as I observe the older members of our congregation carrying urns, crates of tea cups and other heavy items from the rear corridor to set up the refreshments near the bell tower. The hospitality given after the Wednesday service is I am sure one of the reasons that our mid-week service attracts a respectable number of people. It is also used on a variety of other occasions, not least for the Foodbank and for other services and events. As part of ensuring (under our vision statement) that we have 'buildings that are well-used and open to the fullest extent' we need to be able to provide refreshments more easily.

I am aware that there is some history to a previous proposal, which caused some division before I came here in September 2005. I am clear that this is not the same proposal, and that the need for us to do something has become greater, not less. We should as members of the Body of Christ here be able to explore this without fear or rancour, and I should like to see us develop some ideas, involving our church family, so that we make this part of thinking 'in the round' through the various aspects of the future use of our buildings to serve God and our community.

6. **Seating.** We have been given more flexibility by the wonderful gift of the chairs which formerly were used by Bedford United Reformed Church. It would be good to see what else we might introduce that would increase our ability to hold a variety of events more easily within the church.
7. **Publicising our church in the world of today.** Finally, I'd love 2015 to be the year we advertise, advertise, and advertise. We need to use every method to proclaim that we are here in the community, serving God, and open for business. Somebody asked about St Mary's recently after seeing one of our members wearing the distinctive sweat shirt in the supermarket. We need to increase our presence in the electronic media, and keep more in touch with a whole variety of people: wedding couples, baptism families, the bereaved, new visitors, schools, the university and all sorts of groups in the community. We need to give more people opportunities to know what is on offer at St Mary's, and provide opportunities for the 'God incidences' whereby someone sees something about St Mary's just at a time of spiritual need or searching.

I look forward to working with representatives from our publicity group and others to make 2015 a year of proclamation, thanksgiving, service and celebration.

Please take this home for your thoughts and prayers, and I hope we will be able to investigate and see ways to move ahead on these during 2015.

With my love and prayers

Richard

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