

## Rector's Report

Much of my agenda this year was set by the Parish Profile, in which concern was expressed that the new Rector address the needs of the young people in the church and develop the church's ministry to them. We began this process with the parish conference, which we held at St Leonard's Primary School in September. The conference gave us an opportunity to come together and think about what the principles behind our ministry to children should be and the sort of shape it should take. Following the conference we have

- started our monthly all age service, *Celebrating Together*,
- started a week day service for children under 5, *Toddler church*,
- re-launched the admission of children to communion before confirmation,
- seen the growth of our 9-13s group during Sunday worship and
- seen the start of a new ministry for the 14+ age group which they are taking a lead in developing.

All this has been in addition to the excellent work that was already going on in the Creche, Sunday School and various groups in the scouting movement.

I have been deeply impressed by the openness you have shown to change over the last year and am astonished on reflection by the energy and initiative so many different people has shown over the last year. There has been a truly generous spirit abroad that has borne much fruit. What is more impressive is that this has been despite there being quite some concern and anxiety among some people about how the children were in our Sunday services.

Over 70 people responded to the Survey reviewing *Celebrating Together* in March and clearly a number of people still have some concern about how children participate in worship. I thought this would be a good opportunity to share with you the results of the review.

## Results and Conclusions from the Celebrating Together Review

### Survey Statistics

Total number of responses 72.

### Age of respondents

Under 10	1
11-20	2
20-40	13
40-60	29

27 respondents had **children who came to church** with them.

### Age of Children

10 had children under 4, 10 had children under 9, 8 had children under 14, and 7 had children who were 14.

### Creche

Only 3/10 parents with creche aged children wanted the creche to be open on the first Sunday of the Month.

### Number of services attended.

25 people had been to all the services, 13 to five, 15 to four, 10 to three, 5 to two and 2 to only one service. Some did not indicate how many services they had attended.

### Preferred Service

Most people liked both services (39), 25 preferred the usual service, 3 people preferred *Celebrating Together*.

### **Length of service**

17 people found the service too long. (9 of these were parents)  
52 thought it was just about right in length,  
1 thought it was too short.  
1 commented that all the services are rather long.

### **Can you see and hear?**

17 people said they could not see or hear some parts of the service.  
1 person could not see properly.  
The rest could not always hear because either the PA system was not working properly, the person speaking did not speak clearly enough, the noise from children around them made it hard to hear.

### **Best place for communion**

44 thought that standing round the Altar was the best place.  
11 thought the chancel steps was the best place 16 had no preference  
1 person said in their seat.

### **Analysis of written comments.**

40 people wrote additional comments.

### **The behaviour of the children**

The most frequent concern for those who commented was the behaviour of the children during the service. There were several comments about children playing rather than being involved with the service, there were also concerns that children were allowed by their parents to eat during the service and that crisps were particularly inappropriate. Parents were also concerned about their children's behaviour and that long services and long sermons made their job more difficult.  
Several people expressed ambivalence about the presence of the children. They thought it was a good idea to try and engage them more but were not sure that the service achieved this. They felt it was important that the children were there but didn't like the noise they made. The layout makes the children more visible. This was positive for some but not for others. Parents commented that they preferred the lay out. Others felt the lay out gave license to the children to play during the service.

### **The Length of the service**

It was generally, but not only, the parents of younger children who found the service to long, although most of the congregation did not. However given that one of the most frequent reasons people give for not being able to hear is the noise of the children it might serve everyone better if the service was shorter.

### **Sidespeople**

There were several comments about sidespeople. Seating people with the new layout was thought to be more difficult. Taking the collection was also thought to be more difficult.

### **All Age Worship**

There were six people who felt that the service was not all age, but rather a children's service and were unhappy about this.

### **Hymns**

Several people thought that the hymns chosen should be more modern in style and one person felt that it would be good to clap in more modern ones.

### **Sermons**

Sermons were appreciated but thought to be too long.

## **Parade**

Several people thought that the uniformed organisation should come to more of the services and be more involved in leading them.

If I can respond to that, the frequency of the parade services is at the request of the leaders of the uniformed organisations. I have now invited them to send a representative to our planning meetings and I am delighted that Mark Kilner is now a member of the *Celebrating Together* planning group.

## **Layout**

There were mixed view about this, some were very positive and some very negative.

## **Communion**

Several people made lengthy comments of theological depth about the place of communion. Many argued for having communion in the usual place. We have now returned to having communion in the same place as the other Sundays.

## **Order of service**

Two people commented on finding it difficult that the Hymns and Collect were on a separate sheet.

Having shared this feed back with you I thought it would be helpful at this point to share with you my vision for this service and our ministry to young people generally. What I am working towards is a situation where everyone is engaged by and participating in our worship when we meet together as the church. Worship is something we have to learn how to do whether we are adults or children. Putting our focus on God and praying together are something that we need to learn to do together as a church, indeed it is one of the central purposes of the church.

However we are all different and different people find different things help them worship. For some of us it is the music we sing or hear, for others it is the words of the liturgy, for others what is said in the sermon or the intercessions, for others it is what is expressed in ritual and symbol, for others it is being silent together. Each of us will have our preferences but there are also times when we discover God speaking to us through the worship in unexpected ways as we grow faith and change.

The primary purpose of activities like *Toddler Church* and the First Communion Classes is to help our young people learn how to worship so that they can grow in faith and mature as Christ's disciples. From our baptism we are all part of the body of Christ, we are all part of one another, and we all need to be nurtured as Christ's disciples. Our *Celebrating Together Service* gives our young people a regular opportunity to worship with us and so grow into the adult church, it is also an opportunity for all of us to remember that it is together that we are the body of Christ.

We will only begin to engage the children in our worship if we move away from an approach to children in the church that is focused on distracting them with books or drawing or toys towards helping them learn how to worship. Some of this work needs to happen outside of our Sunday Worship at *Toddler Church* and Sunday School and so on, but we also need to make sure that we worship in a way that engages them when they are with us.

The challenge then is to offer worship that has both depth and variety and that meets the needs of all those who are present of what ever age. It requires of each of us a sensitivity towards one another, a mutual hospitality and courtesy, if so diverse a group of people, in so many ways, is going to achieve this. But this, it seems to me is precisely what the gospel calls us to. If we cannot love one another as we worship what are we doing here?

This is work we need to persevere with, both in terms of ongoing nurture and in creating truly all age worship, but I think it is worth saying that what we are doing together is already beginning to bear fruit. While the first all age worship was incredibly noisy, over the following weeks there have been growing numbers of moments of real prayerful silence and attention from the whole of the gathered community.

On Easter Day we had nearly a hundred young people in the congregation, which marked a four fold increase on last year. When I first arrived I was very struck that such a large and thriving church had proportionally so few children. It feels like a much healthier balance now. I am looking forward to the day when we have children nagging their parents because they want to go to church!

At this point I think it is also important to say that I do recognise that not everybody has children and that I do not want to give the impression that I see the work with young people as the focus of the ministry of this church. It has been the focus of this year because there was a perception that things were out of balance and that an important part of the church was not getting the attention it needed, but all of this grows out of a much broader vision of what it means to be church.

One of the striking things about St Leonard's at the moment is that in a time of general decline in the Church of England we are growing. God is sending us more people. On Thursday we celebrate Ascension Day and we will be reminded of Christ's commission to go and make disciples of all nations. This, it seems to me, is at the very heart of what we are called to at St Leonard's. By God's grace we have been gifted with a congregation that comes not just from many nations, but many continents. Our task here is to learn together what it means to be disciples of Christ and to grow together as the body of Christ.

There are not many churches that have such great diversity. There are more than 20 different nationalities represented in the congregation that I know about and probably more. If we can truly be a place where each person is valued, each person is nurtured and grows in faith and love, where each person discovers the gifts they have and offers those gifts to God's service, then we will truly be a sign of God's kingdom coming among us and a sign of hope for the world.

Through our life together as a church we each need to discover where God is calling us and the true freedom the resurrection brings to all. It has been a great joy to me to see a growth in ministry to the older members of the congregation as well as the younger this year. The Freedom Club, for all those who have a freedom pass in the church, is I believe a prophetic choice of name. The whole church should be a freedom club, a place where we are free to discover who we truly are in Christ, to learn to love and be loved freely and to discover the glorious liberation that is won for us in the resurrection of Christ.

Being a disciple of Christ means being truly free. One of the BCP collects talks about our God as one 'whose service is perfect freedom'. That is what we need to discover. We need to move from doing what we ought to do, to doing what we love. A church so shaped also becomes free to respond to God's call, to follow where the spirit leads. It is through such freedom that we will discover the treasures our diversity contains and we will be made ready to be part of Christ's Kingdom.

In practical ways this means giving each other permission to stop doing things when we feel we have done enough. It means having the freedom to say no, or to suggest doing something new. It even means having the freedom to try things out and make mistakes. There are many signs of life and growth in discipleship already in the church. Since we started holding daily prayer in church, several folk come and join the service for one or more days a week. There was a very generous response to the appeal for Bibles earlier this year and it is very encouraging that since they have arrived they are being used by many members of the congregation and visitors to the church. There was a very good response to the Lent Groups with nearly 40 members of the congregation meeting during lent to think about how they can live in a more environmentally responsible way. It is good that we have people willing to stand for and take on the various offices of the church at this meeting.

As we seek to grow in our discipleship and help one another to do the same we need to make sure that we have a building that helps us to do this, and that can accommodate our life together as we grow. Over the coming year we need to look together at how we maintain and develop our building to best serve our life together in Christ. The PCC are going to be considering their vision for the building in the light of the ministry of the church at their annual away day this year. This will provide the basis for our planning and our work following on from that.

If we are to do all that God calls us to do, we will need to respond to his abundant generosity generously. In particular we need as a congregation to move towards planned giving where each of us gives first to God and thinks about what an appropriate level of tithe should be, rather than coming to church and just giving what ever it is we have in our pockets. We need to encourage one another to be good stewards of all the good things God has given us individually and together. We need to steward our talents, our time and our money and this beautiful building so that each of our lives are lived to the Glory of God.

Amen.