

A few words from the Vicar

*Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.
(Proverbs 16:3)*

Last month I mentioned that we are in discussion with neighbouring parishes in Radcliffe about the possibility of our joining with them to become a team covering the whole of Ainsworth and Radcliffe. I plan to keep everyone informed about the progress of these discussions via our weekly pewsheet and my monthly magazine articles. This is subject, of course, to observing the usual protocols; rightly, specific proposals must be discussed by the PCC first and there will be occasions when confidences need to be kept.

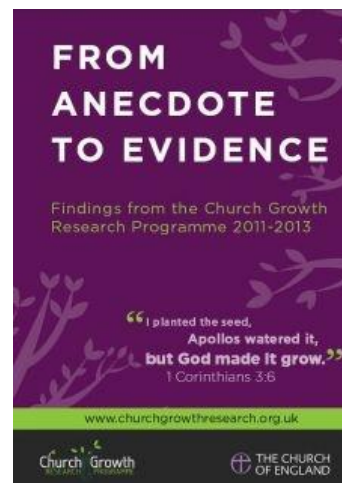
The project steering committee (Chris Haworth, Bill White and I represent our Church) has met and has begun to tease out the possibilities, risks and opportunities. There is nothing to report yet other than to say that, at the moment, everyone is very positive about our future together.

As we explore the possibilities for the future, it is of crucial importance that all of the PCCs involved fully understand what it is we are signing up for and collectively address any risks that could prevent a successful outcome. For now the process has a hint of the due diligence undertaken by commercial organisations in preparation for a merger or acquisition. By that I don't mean that we have an army of accountants and consultants pouring over our records (we couldn't afford that) but rather something much more gentile; we are gaining an appreciation of each other's hopes and fears, trying to get an appreciation of similarities and differences, exploring how things might work and identifying the risks.

It is essential we do this. As someone who worked for the Co-op for many years, I'm only too well aware of the serious consequences that can arise when the parties to a merger fail to undertake adequate due diligence and, therefore, do not fully understand what they are getting into.

Assuming the due diligence doesn't throw up any bombshells that mean we have a no go, what would success look like? Well, we are a successful church; we are becoming more mission-minded (we have a Mission Action Plan and are implementing it), we are thriving and we are growing. Bearing in mind there will be less input from me once we become part of a team, a successful outcome would be to ensure that any future team has the right focus and framework in place so that we in Ainsworth can continue to thrive and continue to grow. Indeed, real success isn't just about creating a team, it is much more than that; it is about drawing our parishes together to create a group of thriving, growing, mission-minded churches that collaborate together in reaching out in God's love to the people of Ainsworth and Radcliffe.

Last month I pointed out that research conducted by the Church of England Church Growth Programme had found that churches grow best as single parishes with their own minister. The research also identified a strong tendency for churches within teams to decline. Having since read some of the underlying research I was interested (indeed relieved!) to learn that,



whilst there is a strong correlation between teams and decline, there is no evidence of causality. It is not a given that churches within teams decline. What do I mean? Well, just because churches in teams have a tendency to decline, it does not mean that it was their being part of a team that caused the decline. Sooner or later, declining churches end up in teams and, unless underlying problems are addressed, continue to decline.

The research also identified some evidence of growth within teams and, from interviews with clergy and lay leaders in those parishes, recognised a list of attributes that allowed them to buck the statistical trend. Many of those attributes are already in place within this parish or are areas we have already identified for development within our Mission Action Plan. The fact is, growth is possible within teams providing where there is a desire for growth and:

- the clergy are not overburdened by administration and are therefore freed to exercise leadership and maintain visibility within the community;
- buildings are fit for purpose and in a decent state of repair;
- there is a proliferation of lay leaders and a strong sense of fellowship within congregations;
- there is an outwardly focused mind-set and strong engagement with the local community (i.e. a strong focus upon mission), including establishing new congregations where they are needed; and
- believers are nurtured and there is a strong focus on schools, children, young people and families.

Based upon my understanding of the research, I'm quietly confident that we can pull it off. Nonetheless, there is a sting in the tail. The research does rather suggest that the absence of these things invariably leads to decline.

So, I pray for a successful outcome and I would encourage everyone else to do the same.

Every Blessing

Dave