

## GILLY

1. On this day when we are celebrating the glorious breadth and depth of Christian witness over the centuries, and as we have come together from across the two parishes, it is a good opportunity to invite everyone to share in visions for the saints of today, and of the future,

If we dream of the church and world in 10/20 years time, what do we see? Can we dare see a good cross section of our community gathering together in worship each week, confidently relating to the needs of children and young people, to the poor and marginalised and growing daily in the love of Christ? Or do we see something else?

Declining numbers at worship is not unique to us, or to the Church of England, and is not happening everywhere. In part it reflects enormous change in our society - which affects not only the life of the church but many organisations and institutions: even in the last 20 years, working hours and patterns, family life, Sunday trading and other activities, disinclination or lack of opportunity to become a member, full-time grandparenting - all these things affect the ways the people can, or choose, to opt in to community life. We have to be realistic about what 21st century life looks like. It is not that fewer people have a sense of spiritual things today, but fewer are looking to the church as a place to express their spirituality.

Also, big changes in churches: worship styles, music, fewer clergy, lay ministry, funding, bad press.

Canon Judy Hirst, Local Church Growth and Development Adviser for our Diocese of Durham, invited us to get real to these things when she came to the parish in July last year. Amongst the background she shared with some research about church attendance. On average about 2% of the UK population are church attenders (in Jarrow and Simonside that would be around 500 people (all denominations) and less on any given Sunday. Across our two parishes we are seeing around 75 worshippers each week (with more on special occasions). Roughly 10% of the population (UK) attend infrequently. What I found most striking in the figures we were given was that 40% of the population are described as de-churched - i.e. they have had some contact/experience of the church in the past, but do so no longer. And half of these (ie 20%) were found to be open to re contact. This highlights a huge opportunity available to us, for re-introducing people to the love of Christ celebrated in the church, if we want to take it. We probably all know some of these "de-churched" people - members of our families, godchildren, neighbours, friends...

Do we make best use of the opportunities God gives us? What sort of church does God want?

## JUDITH

2. The PCCs agreed to invite Judy Hirst to come and work with us to help us identify how we might move forward to create an environment for growth in the church. Growth in spiritual commitment, in service to community and in numbers.

A small group of 1 or 2 from each church plus the clergy (that is, those here, plus Diane Jamieson, Irene Mcconnachie) have met 3 times with Judy Hirst, twice in the spring - which led to our PCC Away Day in May, and then again in October. At the Away Day the whole PCCs were invited to consider our situation and how we might move forwards.

Judy repeatedly challenged us to think about what each of our churches are for. She also challenged us to think about what makes a church - is it the people, or a building? And she encouraged us to think of our people as one church, worshipping in four centres. How are our places of worship distinctive, and in what way are we a blessing to our communities? Above all we were encouraged to be realistic about the changes in the world around us which suggest that simply continuing as we have always done will not be life-giving.

To get a better understanding of this, and of how we fit into our communities, we did three things over the summer:

- i) Map of the parishes, showing where worshippers live, looking to see what community each worship centre is serving.
- ii) produced and circulated a prayer card with a Prayer for Growth.
- iii) Held conversations with a number of people, some from within the church, and some on the fringes or not associated, to find facts and perceptions about church participation and the role of the church in the community. Some of you participated in this, either by asking the questions, or by acting as respondents - for which thank you very much.

## FREDA

3. We hope you will take time in the hall to look at the map after the service.

It shows two things very clearly:

St Simon's people live almost exclusively within their parish.

Jarrow people criss cross across the parish to the different churches (for a variety of reasons) and a good proportion live outside the parish boundaries. There is also a substantial group of people being ministered to at home (or in care homes).

The prayer is being used daily. It is reprinted in today's pew sheet. If you have lost your card, please keep this copy, and continue to pray it.

The conversations were varied and give some useful insights, albeit from a relatively small group. Here is a very brief summary for the Parish of Jarrow - first for the group of attendees, and then for non-church people:

Of the attendees:

- Nearly all (13/15) started coming through an invitation by an existing church goer, or after a marriage, baptism, or funeral in church.
- most are involved in some particular role at church, and one third volunteer their time outside the church.
- All but one described their churches positively and would recommend them to a new comer, and many were hopeful for the future, through faith and dedication of the people, and the power of God; but there is also considerable concern about our demographics
- the majority of respondees were unsure about how our churches are a blessing to our communities - some cited occasional offices, and individual church members' lives as potentials. Many thought our community would view us negatively - for example ,old fashioned and out of touch.

From the non-church interviews:

- nearly all knew about things that happened at the church, and most had a loose connection, through family or special services. Experience was mixed - with both negative (too cold, music not upbeat enough) and positive.
- just over half were aware of ways in which the church engages in the community, but in several cases this was referring to events run by 3rd parties - eg hall rentals.
- there were positive comments for church community events such as coffee mornings, teas, table top sales
- with regard to the community, respondees gave importance to friendly and safe neighbourhoods, that look loved, and maintain good integration of the generations.
- a lesson to us is that less than a third mentioned the church when responding to a question about how our communities can give hope for the future, and none mentioned the church in relation to how the area might be improved.

SUSAN

4. The group met again with Judy Hirst in early October to discuss our findings. Due to unfortunate circumstances no one from Simonside was able to be there - so the focus was on Jarrow, but many of the points are general.

In the light of what has been said, the key points highlighted were:  
We can't assume that new people will come to church - we have to get out into the community.

We do need to put ourselves out when people do come - eg baptisms - that is, with both preparation, welcome, and followup. We are fortunate in requests for occasional offices in our parishes, so it is up to us to do them really well.

We need to work hard at working out what our buildings are 'for'

We are one Parish who happen to worship in 3 different places

We need to be able to talk about and be more confident in our faith

And we need to communicate what we have found and discussed - so that we are all realistic about the way forward.

We began to see that in whatever way we step forward, and wherever it is focussed, we are looking for the involvement of people from across the worshipping congregations, working together, regardless of where we worship.

So we began to think about what projects we might be able to undertake, stemming out of the opportunities which each of our church buildings give us. NB These are very initial suggestions only.

St Paul's: unique status/place - attracts people for marriage, baptism (from across the parish), and has particular opportunities to create environment for spiritual growth - working with our volunteers, visitors, schools - and perhaps even ourselves?

Developing links with baptism families is important for all our congregations, and we recognise there is plenty of room for a renewed approach here.

St John's: The biggest resource on the Scotch Estate is Simonside Primary school - families as well as children.  
There could be possibilities for developing the use of the hall for community service eg for Housing Support/ project for ex-offenders  
There is a lack of opportunity in this area for parents and little ones to get together for chat/coffee - could we host?

St Peter's: The hall is well let, but little is offered by the church itself, apart from the facilities.  
Can we find ways to connect with hall users?  
Tuesday coffee - already attracts some non-church people - might this be built on?  
A Low cost lunch in the hall was suggested- perhaps with a "thought for the day"?

LIZZIE

5. One step which St Simon's have taken

MARY

6. How do we proceed from here?

We have invited Judy Hirst to come and preach in each of the 4 churches - two in December and two in January, in order to help this be a journey in which we all share as a church.

For we are all being invited to wake up to the realities, and recognise that this involves everyone - not just the small group who have been paving the way.

We are seeking to develop a clearer understanding as to what blessings we might bring to our communities - for the transformation of all.

Our resources are limited, and it is important that we flourish together; so, wherever we start, we are looking for support from across the parish/parishes - regardless of which place of worship it involves.

We have some flip chart sheets in the hall, and invite anyone to write up any suggestions or insights that you are able to offer.

There is one thing open to everyone - we are all invited to take this to heart, and pray.