

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE GROUPS

During his time as Interim Pastor at St Peter's, Bishop David undertook a number of initiatives. Of these the most significant was the establishment of 'Looking to the Future Groups'. In February and March, two groups met twice each with an open agenda to look together at the future of the congregation and, in particular, its mission and ministry.

It was very encouraging that 29 people took part. The groups were led by Bishop David and supported by Lay Reader, Mrs Janet McKinnell, and NSM Priest, Revd Sue Whitehouse. The groups were representative of different age groups and contained people who were involved in most of the congregational organisations.

The aim was to give members of the congregation the opportunity of 'trying out' the experience of a dialogue within the congregation and to seek to begin to define a new agenda for the future.

What follows is a brief composite statement drawn from the work of both groups.

MEETING 1

The first meeting of each group was essentially an opportunity to look at St Peter's 'as it is' and to begin to identify areas which might be explored in a second meeting. What follows is a summary of the group responses to three questions.

WHAT DO WE VALUE ABOUT ST PETER'S

- our diversity in age and ethnicity
- significant location and the garden at the heart of the city
- the welcoming character of the congregation – feeling of belonging
- good teamwork and strong commitment – willingness to get involved
- Episcopalian tradition in liturgy and music
- communication
- community focus – Community Outreach Group & work of Children and Families Worker

WHAT IS OUR CONTEXT

- Newington is a diverse and international community
- the community changes rapidly
- young families – 109 families connected to our Mother and Toddler Group
- rich and poor
- active churches and voluntary organisations, Food Bank, etc
- a busy area on Sundays

WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO BUILD AND TO BECOME

- a prayerful community which teaches faith
- a congregation with good governance and sustainability
- a congregation which mainstreams the work with children and young families and with international students which is being developed by the Children and Families Worker
- completing the building project with congregational commitment
- a diverse community which expresses its diversity in worship and life
- a safe place with a culture of openness
- an authentic Christian community
- an integrated community where people understand their place in a larger whole
- a community which is getting better at communication
- a congregation which has an internal dialogue about its life and priorities

MEETING 2

Inevitably, the second meetings of the two groups diverged rather more than the initial meeting. What follows is an attempt to reflect the themes which were common to both groups – even if expressed in different language.

GROWING IN FAITH

There is a recognition that the congregation needs to pay attention to its spirituality – to its holiness. Some see that in terms of activities – Home Groups, Retreats, Lay Leadership. Others see it as a set of values – openness, transparency, honesty.

There was also a real interest in questions of congregational growth. The presence of young families and of international students in the congregation was seen as an opportunity – one which challenges the congregation to adopt new and more flexible patterns of life and worship.

In conversation about faith development, it was clear that some held an aspiration that St Peter's might become a praying community – the kind of community which has a spiritual integrity and authenticity which is obvious to those who come into the church and share the worship.

GOVERNANCE

Questions of governance are an understandable preoccupation for many members of the congregation. There was discussion of decision-making – where are decisions made and by whom – and of the need for care in selecting and supporting Vestry members. There was also a recognition of the need for clarity in the role of the Rector and for an understanding of leadership – particularly clergy leadership – in the congregation.

In this context, one of the groups held a particularly searching discussion about clergy leadership. They suggested that:

- Leadership should be creative
- Leadership should set a culture – including both spirituality/holiness and good governance
- Leadership should be able to construct and sustain an internal dialogue in the congregation

MISSION

There was a real understanding of the need to build a mission focus for the congregation – exploring ways in which community service and outreach can appropriately become mission. There is already thought being given to a more active presence at Freshers' Week and at other times in the University and the need to build pathways into faith and membership for those who are on the fringes of the congregation – for example in the Mother and Toddler Group.

CONCLUSION

A two-meeting process obviously cannot do more than give people a taste of what might be possible where more time is available. Yet the level of participation in the meetings and the quality of the discussion suggests that there is potential for the development of a new kind of congregational life which builds on the strengths of the present patterns.

People can see that there is potential in the presence of younger families and of the international students – as well as in the development of a 'community-facing congregation' which has a core of deep faith. People value the strong Episcopalian liturgical tradition and the musical resources of the congregation – but wonder how that tradition might be developed to embrace that diversity.

Questions of governance and leadership are in the minds of many. They see the need for high quality leadership which is spiritually rooted and leads with openness.

There is potential for an exciting future at St Peter's – exciting and challenging