

A REPORT TO ST JOHN the BAPTIST CHURCH, CAVERSHAM  
ABOUT ITS INTERVIEWS ON  
CONGREGATIONAL MISSION AND MINISTRY  
from  
The Congregational Discovery Reading Team

**How to Use this Report**

This report gives the major findings of a self-study by members of the congregation about the character of worship, education, and general involvement of members, as well as the congregation's responses to community and congregational changes. It is based on 18 interviews, gathered in the autumn of 2015, by several members of the congregation.

We believe these findings should be taken seriously even though they are based on information from a moderate number of interviews. Leaders should consider their own reflections and use common sense about the issues raised in this report, building on the strengths of St John's while addressing problem areas as opportunities for further growth as a congregation.

We believe that both the interviewers and those with whom they talked have the best interests of St John's at heart and gave information they hope will help the congregation.

**Our recommendations are meant as questions, not to tell the congregation what to do.** We believe that your congregation's continuing work in mission, particularly with the Partnership for Missional Church, may help it address some of the opportunities discovered in these interviews. We also believe the congregation's leadership has the wisdom and ability to best address its own situation.

All of the people who took time to answer these interview questions, and most certainly the Listening Leaders who did so many splendid interviews, should be commended for their willingness to think seriously about your congregation's members' past and present experiences of worship, learning, change, and mission. Such careful and helpful work will be of dramatic value as we all consider what God is up to in the community and what God is calling St John's to do here. As we seek to build on strengths, we remember that God equips us for every good work and that we lead by the grace of God's gifts to us.

It is worth noting that the interviews consisted of 11 inside family, 4 inside strangers and 3 outside strangers. This may suggest that a) the responses need to be read as from a majority of people at the heart of the congregation and b) it is difficult to find 'fringe' people at St. John's which may be cause for reflection in itself.

## Question 1: Tell a story about how you sense God's presence and activity in this congregation

*18 interviews, 26 remarks*

God is everywhere x 6  
Get together x 3 (different generations x 1)  
Quiet and peaceful x 2  
Friendship x2  
Sermons x 2 (poor, uninspiring x1)  
Friendliness  
High altar, lady chapel  
Activities  
Work tasks  
Outstretching to the community  
Community brought into the church  
Love  
No need for the dogmatic and formal  
Space/use  
Communion  
Family unit

### **Recommended questions to consider**

1. There is a good mix of accounts of how people experience God's presence with a number of respondents identifying that God is everywhere. Respondents did not articulate so strongly a sense of God's activity. How might your congregation reflect on where and how God is at work (God's activity) both within and beyond the church in light of the fact that many acknowledge that God is everywhere?
2. The barn dance was given as a place where God was very present in the social mix of the generations. How might the congregation grow this ability to join people together in friendship as an expression of God's activity?
3. There is a clear sense of the holiness of the church building and several people described meeting God there. How might you use this sense of being a holy place with the outside community in mind? How open is the building in the week?

## **Question 2: Describe an experience of profound worship you have had**

*18 interviews, 21 remarks*

Preaching / Words x 7

Music x 5

Clergy unobtrusive and engaging

Deep involvement in baptism of my children

Inspiring sermon

Choir

Peaceful service, quiet thoughtful time

Experience of healing

Comfort in relationship

Coming together, all together

At the foot of the cross

### **Recommended questions to consider**

1. It's interesting that a number of people's most profound worship experiences were outside the local church. What might be the reasons behind this? How can you draw on the kinds of experiences cited by the interviewees to encourage and enrich the life of your worshipping community?
2. A number of profound moments of worship are around specific occasions e.g. funerals, baptisms, events in the church calendar like holy week and Easter. Can you identify how you as a church engage people in these experiences? – and then could you extend those moments into "ordinary time"?
3. High value is placed on inspiring words/ sermons (and for some also traditional music) which is perhaps surprising. What do you think is behind this desire for 'the Word'? How might you be able to meet that desire in your people?

### **Question 3: Tell about the ways people fight in this congregation.**

*18 interviews, 32 remarks*

#### **What people fight about**

No personal experience/ no evidence/ not involved x 6

Priest/clergy x 6

All age service/ style of worship x 2

Clergy not willing to visit the sick or visit out of parish nursing homes x 2

Our church community fights with the vicars

Difficulties trying to meet needs

Heating of clergy house

Fighting authority

Handling of someone's illness

The kitchen

#### **How people fight**

Leave/ unresolved/ huff x 2

Discussed and resolved x 2

Clearly intransigent

Met half-way

Lack of care shown

Difficulty raising issues in large groups

Facilitator helped resolve issues

Talk face to face and find solution

#### **Recommended questions to consider:**

1. You do have some ways of dealing with the inevitable conflict that comes with church life – especially when it does not involve the clergy! It seems that dealing with authority and some clergy is especially troubling. We wonder what is behind this difference and how might the ways you mediate conflict with each other be transferred to dealing with clergy? What mechanisms, formal and informal, could you put in place to manage conflict between clergy, lay authority and the wider congregation? We will offer some of these as we continue on the PMC journey.
2. How can you mediate different opinions/ preferences on what people see as important aspects of church life, whether that be worship styles, pastoral activities, the kitchen use, etc? What is the vision for the church that binds you together?
3. Given the range of needs and varying expectations within the congregation, how do you value each other in community? Where do you create space to allow opportunities to listen to each other?

**Question 4: Tell a memory that gives you anxiety about the future of this congregation. Tell a memory that gives you hope.**

*18 interviews, 41 remarks*

**Sources of Anxiety**

Poor leadership x 6  
Lack of money and resources x 6  
Low attendance x 4  
No leadership x 3  
Lack of young people x 3  
That we might not get the right leader x 2  
Church of England bureaucracy x 2

**Sources of Hope**

Children x 6  
Good future leadership x 5  
Positive measures being taken to find the right clergy x 2  
Congregation like family x 2  
Café  
Utilising free space  
Sharing with Romanian church  
Music  
Fresh Expressions of Church  
Loyalty of congregation to church wardens

**Recommended questions to consider:**

1. There is a lot of anxiety over previous church leadership and yet also hope about finding a new leader. The congregation seems to invest a lot in its clergy – why might this be and how realistic is it? How much might your history and anxieties about the past influence your selection process for a new leader? What qualities would you like to see in a new leader in terms of where your church is at now, and what are your expectations of that person?
2. There is real optimism and hope about the potential that exists for the church to grow and remain an integral part of the community. Yet there is anxiety about challenges and resources to make this happen. One of the principles of PMC is that God has given the local church all the resources it needs to be and do what God is calling it to be and do. Can you identify the gifts you do have that can be employed in joining in what God is going? How might you be able to live with this anxiety and discover where God is at work?

**Question 5: Tell how people participate in the life of this church.**

*18 interviews, 92 remarks*

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| Cleaning x 9<br>Events x 7<br>Sides people x 6<br>Reading x 6<br>Serving x 6<br>Flowers x 6<br>Intercessions x 4<br>Maintenance and gardening x 4<br>Welcoming x 4<br>A few people doing most things x 3<br>Teas and coffees x 3<br>Music x 3<br>Attending services x 3<br>Fundraising x 3 | Committees x 3<br>Chalice x 3<br>Pastoral team x 2<br>Choir x 2<br>Sunday school x 2<br>Café x 2<br>Home visiting/ home communion x 2<br>Communications<br>Uniformed youth groups<br>Mothers Union<br>PCC<br>Church Leadership Team<br>Community Garden<br>Cooking club<br>Lay led services<br>House groups |
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**Recommended questions to consider:**

1. It's clear that many people in the congregation are actively involved in maintaining the life of the church and see that as important. This is great as there is a lot of energy amongst you and the ability to participate holds people in. What do you believe about God and yourselves that places so much importance on your life together and your Sunday worship? How might this life and energy be also focused outward towards those who are not yet members?
2. Quite a few people here and elsewhere have mentioned the café and community garden as places where you interact with your local community. What are you learning in these initiatives that helps you to make meaningful relationships with strangers who might also be 'people of peace'?

**Question 6: Describe this congregation to someone new and tell how they would be nurtured here.**

*18 interviews, 54 remarks*

**Describe this congregation:**

Friendly x 12

Welcoming x 12 (some references include welcoming of children and families)

Aging/ older congregation x 10

Few children/ young families x 3

Inclusive

Wanting to look outwards and draw people in

**Tell how they would be nurtured:**

No nurturing or lack of x 6

Don't really want more one to one contact x 1

No real (biblical) teaching x 2

Middle Anglican teaching x 1

Does this feel like a club?

Mothers Union

Sometimes within services and sermons

Opportunities to get involved

Hospitality

***Recommended questions to consider:***

1. You consistently describe your congregation as welcoming and friendly which is good. You are much less positive about the opportunities for nurturing newcomers. What might be the next step beyond initial friendliness and welcome for 'reasonably friendly looking strangers' who are new to you? How can you go beyond the outward welcome? What does genuine fellowship look like to you?
2. Elsewhere you have noted the joy of working inter-generationally and here the presence of elderly people and a few youngsters is noted. How might the numbers of elderly people you have and their ability to interact with younger folk become a gift rather than, as perhaps perceived here, a burden? What would need to change?

**Question 7: Tell about how you and others feel about the changes in this congregation in the past three to five years.**

*18 interviews, 22 remarks*

**Positive changes:**

Sharing space with Romanian Orthodox x 2  
Prefer relaxed attitudes  
Technological change - 'Not too far'  
All Age Service  
Community garden  
Café  
Lay preacher occasionally

**Negative changes:**

Noisy, lack of discipline in services x 4  
Decline in children's work after signs of growth x 3  
Resist change x 2  
Clergy care  
Sadness over decline  
Burn out of the few  
Change of service time  
Anxious (frightening video shown at All Age Service)

**Recommended questions to consider:**

1. What is interesting to us is that change has been happening at St. John's and that you are able to negotiate it even though it doesn't seem to be easy. Does this provide a platform for you to continue to change and address the challenges that may be ahead on the PMC journey? Can you identify the skills you have used to deal with change and use them again?
2. The presence of the Romanian Orthodox church is mentioned here and elsewhere. How might they and their relationship with you be received as a gift beyond your simple sharing of the building? How might mutual learning and understanding grow between you?

**Question 8: Tell about how you and others feel about the changes in this community in the past three to five years**

*18 interviews, 17 remarks*

Redevelopment – positive x 2

Village feel maintained x 2

Redevelopment implications (people don't work in local area) – negative x 2

No knowledge

Freer world, yet complexity of raising children

Materialistic and uncaring

Rich and poor

Lonely people

Increased house prices

Opportunity for the church to be useful

Perhaps we should reach out

Lack of community pub

Sundays aren't sacrosanct anymore

Ethnic diversity

**Recommended questions to consider:**

1. The responses reflect a community around the church that is changing. How might you go about asking where you see God at work within this community? How would you know when you discovered God at work and how might you join in with that?
2. We have noted church engagement with this community. Where does motivation for that engagement in a place like the café come from? How might you extend this engagement into some of the issues identified here? (rich/poor, lack of community pub, loneliness?)

**Additional Comment and question for all three churches:**

We think it would be great if each church was able to read the Congregational Discovery report of the other two churches and all three churches reflect on them together somehow. In this way you could both celebrate your common gifts and challenge each other.

What opportunities are there for the three churches to collaborate, to see themselves as somehow “one-in-three”? We think that each church has some distinctive gifts to offer to the whole and there are commonalities and issues that overlap all three (e.g. a focus on Sunday worship and perhaps a surprising desire for more of ‘the Word’ in sermons etc.). What opportunities or impact might that have – e.g. you might be much stronger together than apart?