

A REPORT TO ST PETER'S 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 24 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 Peter'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 Peter'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 Peter'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, as reported consisted of 13 inside family, 9 inside strangers and 2 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. Peter'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**

*24 interviews, 40 remarks*

Music/ Choir x 6  
Relationships/Friendships x 5  
Prayers x 4  
Ritual x 4  
Stillness/ contemplation x 4  
Communion x 3  
Care x 3  
Being asked to be involved x 3  
Seeing new people x 2  
Welcome x 2  
People finding faith and joining the community  
Heightened spiritual awareness  
Children  
Small groups

**Recommended questions to consider**

1. People truly seem to come to worship to seek God and God's presence in St. Peter's. There is strong emphasis on doing worship well, even excellently – down to taking care over the cleanliness of the linen. How do you think newcomers experience this? How might you find out? How might this emphasis on excellence and the energy which goes into worship also be used during the week as you "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord"?
2. There is a good mix of accounts of how people experience God's presence and activity, with a strong interplay between the ritual and the fellowship of worship. One person mentioned the small groups that exist outside of Sunday. There are several references to new people coming and also finding faith. How might the interplay of worship, fellowship and nurture be enhanced and deepened for the sake of those who are not yet members of St. Peter's? Where might you discuss this as a congregation?

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

*24 interviews, 31 remarks*

Lack an experience of profound worship x 3 (one, because of anxiety over unfamiliarity with ritual)

Light x 3 (especially light coming in or being brought in to church)

Maundy Service ritual x 3

Funeral, celebration of life x 2

Choral evensong x 2 (once, in the Cathedral)

Evensong, quiet contemplation x 2

Confirmation x 2

Private prayer

Prayer

Midnight mass – atmosphere and ritual

Consecration/ Transubstantiation

Sermon

Participation

Passover meal around the table

First Communion

Baptism (sincerity of those involved)

Sunrise service

Small group intimacy

Family wedding

Easter service procession

### **Recommended questions to consider**

1. A number of people's experiences of profound worship are centred around seasonal or life milestones. What might you learn from these occasions that can help inform more regular acts of worship?
2. Many people's profound worship experiences were within a liturgical framework. This is clearly a gift that St. Peter's has of creating meaningful liturgical worship. People spoke movingly of seeing or bringing light into church. How might this light be made available to more people in St. Peter's parish?

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

*24 interviews, 42 remarks*

**What people fight about**

No experience/awareness x 8  
Re-ordering/ glass doors x 5  
Services – especially lay-led x 5  
Leadership style  
Children  
Dishwasher  
Porch notice-board

**How people fight**

Voting with feet x 3  
Underhand x 2  
Not really handled  
Not confrontational  
Open Forum  
Coercion  
Handled democratically

**Recommended questions to consider:**

1. Conflict and disagreement is normal and to be expected. You already have some experience of “open forum” conversation. What have you learnt from these events? How do you continue create an environment that allows for more open and transparent discussion over contentious issues? We will introduce some tools you can use later in the PMC process.
2. The reading team sense there are some in the congregation for whom tradition is of primary importance and some for whom embracing change/new approaches is important. How can you embrace change whilst honouring history and tradition? Can these things be held together in good, creative tension?
3. The new doors were a clear source of controversy and it may be worth reflecting further on what this represents for you (something about the importance of the threshold and its openness or otherwise to the world outside?). What have you learnt from their installation and what has happened since?

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

*18 interviews, 51 remarks*

**Memory that gives you anxiety**

Aging congregation x 5  
Clergy (past and present) x 4  
Budget deficit x 3  
Dwindling congregation x 2  
Lack of youth x 2  
Resistance to change x 2  
Not inclusive/ left out x 2  
Dwelling in the Word x 2  
Society falling away from religion  
Too little focus on mission

**Memory that gives you hope**

Children/ Junior choir x 8  
New people x 3  
PMC/ addressing the problems x 3  
Serving the community x 3  
New Rector x 3  
Mike and Rachel x 2  
Welcome x 2  
House groups  
Reordering  
Pastoral help

**Recommended questions to consider:**

1. A repeated anxiety is the dwindling nature of the congregation in age and numbers, yet this is balanced by a clear desire to welcome people into the church. How can the church be faithful to its existing congregation, yet still be open to the change that people who are not yet members would bring to it?
2. You have quite a lot of hope – in young people, in the choir, in new people joining and in the current clergy. What would it take to develop these hopes into reality and how would the congregation need to change to bring about that reality?

3. A few people mentioned serving the community and in the interviews as a whole this is one of the few places that interaction between the church and the community is mentioned. How might you begin to look outwards as a whole congregation and engage in fresh ways with people in the parish?

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

*24 interviews, 64 remarks*

Some doing most of the work x 12  
Lots of people doing their bit x 4  
Some come and go x 3  
Not active in community  
Most just attend (don't participate)  
Few who take up the spiritual stuff

Choir x 6	Help each other
Coffee x 4	Pastoral visiting
Cleaning x 4	Carol singing
House group x 3	Services
Prayer leaders x 2	Church warden
Sunday Club/ Cherabim x 2	Priests
Bell ringers x 2	Vestry duty
Olive branch x 2	Treasurer
Committees x 2	Traidcraft
Welcomers	Collect food
Vergers	Toys to Farm Aid
Christmas Bazaar	Rambles

**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. There is also great aspiration for the best in worship. Some noted that there is not much activity in the community apart from a few occasions. Why do you think this might be? What do you believe about God and yourselves that places so much importance on your worship in church on a Sunday?

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

*24 interviews, 55 remarks*

<b>Describe this congregation:</b>	<b>Tell how they would be nurtured:</b>
<p>Welcoming/ Friendly x 11            More welcoming/ approachable than used to be x 4            Older/Aging congregation x 6            Traditional/ Formal x 4            Broad range/ mixed-age x 3            Name-badges help x 2            White British, upper-lower to middle class            Middle class            Mixed welcome indicated with these comments:            Need to put yourself forward            Congregation seem more distant (not individuals)            Welcoming but hesitant            Welcoming but others would find it difficult to join            Some welcoming, others quite reserved            Not always most welcoming</p>	<p>Small groups x 2            Olive Branch x 2            Choir x 2            Nurturing?            Priest            Clergy lack time to nurture            Introducing to people (their experiences)            Personal contact            Pastoral visiting            Not much happens when you walk out the door            Nothing happens to make someone want to come again or get involved            Certain core people – if you get past that point            People who are prepared to ask for help will be given it            Seedlings of faith would struggle to grow ...            little training to help people understand Christianity</p>

**Recommended questions to consider:**

1. People were really honest in their descriptions of your church as welcoming and friendly to some extent but “more distant as a whole”, mainly white British and middle class (perhaps not reflecting the community anymore?) How does the description make you feel? Do you see yourselves like this? What, if anything do you want to do about it?
2. Given your ability to be good welcomers and placing alongside that a number of comments that suggest a disconnect between the formal welcome and informal personal interaction, how might you think about integrating someone new into your life together? What forums/ opportunities do you have for building deeper relationship amongst people, especially newcomers? How do you nurture new faith?

3. One of the benefits of your focus on excellence in worship seems to be that you have been able to keep some people in the faith as they have grown up in the church and stayed, which is a great asset. Some people raised concerns about how this reflects on the church as a whole – perhaps seeming more distant and ‘not much happens when you walk out the door.’ Once again we ask how can the life and spirit you put into worship be turned outwards towards the world?

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

*18 interviews, 50 remarks*

<p><b>Positive changes:</b>          More families, broader ethnic mix x 4          Vacancies/ two interregnums x 2          House groups x 2          More welcoming          Mike, with young family, encourages other families          Trying hard to bring church into better use          More open to getting people who don't belong to come          A few new faces          Present more considered approach more productive          Likes monthly non-Eucharistic service</p>	<p><b>Negative changes:</b>          Shrinking congregation/ decline x 4          Aging x 3          Dan/ previous Rector x 3          Change inflicted (e.g. glass doors)/ insufficient consultation x 2          Uncomfortable/ alienated with changes to liturgy/ services x 2          New ways of services (joint) x 2          Services too long x 2          From Church to Parish          More families with children means more noise          Cost for more upmarket coffee          Hymn books – difficult to hold          Dwelling in the World in main service – not what's expected</p>
--	---

**Other:**

Don't know/ no changes (some implied negatively) x 9  
 Different attitudes to worship, faith and church life among clergy and church officials over the years  
 Lay- leadership like marmite

**Recommended questions to consider:**

1. There are a lot of responses to past change with a mix of feelings. Some changes have been felt positively, but overall the sense given is that change has often been perceived negatively. What is interesting to us is that change has been

happening and that you are able to negotiate it however difficult it might be. 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. Here and in other places in the interviews the issue of the role of the clergy is raised and there are questions over lay leadership – especially in worship. What are the expectations of clergy and laity in the congregation, how do you understand the relationship between them and again are their places where you openly and honestly share feelings, thinking and beliefs in this area?

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

*24 interviews, 39 remarks*

Can't say/ haven't noticed (several not living in the parish) x 7  
People are busier x 5  
Cultural/ethnic diversity x 4  
Self-centred x 3  
More young people x 3  
Empty shops/ small shops closing x 2  
Social divide (between Lower Caversham and Upper Caversham) x 2  
Lonely (more living on their own) x 2  
Desire for upward mobility x 2  
Transient community (lettings)  
Mix of ages and amenities  
More affluent people  
House prices through the roof  
Links with the church not what they used to be  
Fewer people attend church  
Competing activities (from church)  
Unchurched generation – need to go out and meet them  
Church provides an escape (quiet)

**Recommended questions to consider:**

1. There seems to be a good understanding of the community in which St. Peter's is set from the interviewees, despite a number not living in it or being aware. How is this knowledge generated – how might more people become aware of what is going on? Where does the congregation feel that the church fits within this quite diverse and rapidly changing community?

2. We wonder what the church believes about how it relates to the parish? Where might motivation for engagement come from? Social changes and a social division have been noted in the interviews. What part could the church have in engaging with this fairly new reality?
3. 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?

**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?