

Summary of 'Future Finder' Reports for St John's Church Caversham

This document is part of the Partnership for Missional Church output for CTM Parish. It is intended to provide a summary of the contents of the 'Church Future Finder' database for St John's.

First, though, a bit about what on earth this 'future finder' database is for (adapted from some of the PMC documentation):-

Have you ever wondered what your congregation's coffee hour has to do with the shop(s) down the street? What its stained glass windows have to do with the single parent families near the church? Ever wonder who the new people in your community are? Or how they see your church? Or if they see your church? Come in, fill in some blanks, and find out!

We hope you are also willing to ask yourself – and share the answers - some questions about your congregation's future, indeed to open yourself to the possibility that God has a preferred future for your congregation. Together with other members of your congregation and your community, you might discern that future.

Throughout this year, the PMC team has gathered data and narratives that may appear overwhelming and confusing, with no clear next steps. However, when we include these ordinary facts and stories within dwelling in the Word and reflecting on God's mission in our neighbourhood, we are engaging in spiritual discernment. We are narrating these numbers within the story of God's movement in this community. We move beyond numbers and answers to accountability for people and an account of our place in God's mission, past, present, and future.

The questions to ponder at our all-parish 'What's God Up To?' meeting ask us to slow down, and think about the specific information that has been collected. These questions take what may initially be viewed as non-theological data or information and make a theological claim about God's preferred and promised future. They ask us all to confront, again and again, the difficult question "What is God up to here?"

As someone inclined to be brutally task-oriented I would add that without this congregational input the PMC process has no foundation for next year's 'experimental' phase – basically it stalls. PMC requires that the congregation(s) together discern what God is up to before moving on – that is not something the PMC team can do; we simply gather the information and collect and collate the insights. Then we can all move on with the next step toward God's 'preferred and promised future'.

1 Introduction.

St John's Caversham, within the residential area of Lower Caversham, is a neighbourhood church which seeks to be open to God and to one another, and to share his love with all. We have a focus on 'community ministry', seeking to grow by engaging with people who live in the area, and we are part of the Caversham, Thameside and Mapledurham Parish, developing our life together in line with our chosen values: "inclusive, generous and life-giving".

2 Demographic and Deprivation data

The eastern end of the parish, where St John's is based, is a large residential area which is home to around 9,000 people. Over 50% of people in the area are between the ages of 25 and 55, with only around 11% being over the age of 65.

Just over a third of households are single occupancy (about 23% under 65 and 11% over 65). About 27% of households are families with dependent children (roughly 8% being single-parent families).

St John's congregation has a much larger proportion of over-60s than the surrounding area, with a few young families adding to the mix.

There is a sense that the area is occupied by two interspersed communities: 'Old Caversham' - people who have been here most of their lives - and 'New Caversham' - people who are more mobile, have been here for less time and are less connected. For the size of population there are few centres of community in the area, especially in the northern section. If there's one thing a church should be good at, it's surely community.

In the 2011 census less than half (49%) of people classified themselves as Christian; 36% classified themselves as none. The main religious minorities are Muslim (3%) and Hindu (2%). For anyone who believes that being part of a worshipping Christian community is a good thing, there is enormous scope for sharing why that is. "The harvest is plentiful," as Luke's Gospel tells us, even if "the labourers are few."

This is a relatively wealthy area overall, better off than Reading as a whole, which itself is generally fairly prosperous. Around 60% of households own their own homes. But there are pockets of deprivation within that overall context, as well as pockets of greater affluence.

Anecdotally (but from several sources) there is said to be a large number of churchgoers who live in this area but who cross the river every Sunday to town centre churches (particularly Greyfriars). Lively worship and existing church relationships are a part of the reason for that, but I wonder how many are really in tune with the conservative theology of many town-centre churches, and how many would relate better to values which are 'inclusive, generous and life-giving'?

St John's is part of the Lower Caversham Community Partnership, consisting of representatives from St. John's, Newbridge Nursery and Caversham Hall, which was set up to help develop joint working between the organisations in order to meet the needs of the people of Lower Caversham.

3. Building Use and Travel

St John's church building is a good, big flexible space, with fine acoustics when full. Kitchen and toilet space is more limited, which is a barrier to expansion.

The building is used by its main congregation on Sunday mornings, Thursday mornings (for midweek communion), Friday mornings (for morning prayer), and some Friday evenings (for choir practice). The church building is also used by a congregation from the Romanian Orthodox Church, once a month later on Sunday morning, and at other times during the week.

On Tuesdays the building is used by the Caversham Community Cafe, serving (proper) coffee, cakes and snacks to the local community, especially parents and children on route to the nearby nursery. Several evenings a year there are events such as musical evenings of various sorts (swing band, barn dance, visiting choir, etc), which often sell out, plus special services (eg All Souls) and biannual fairs. In addition there is a gardening club on Friday afternoons who use part of the church grounds. The Amersham Road Cookery Club is based in a local community centre rather than the church's own building.

It is really the only community building of a decent size within the area, with the possible exception of the local Methodist Church, so it would be hard to replace. However, maintenance costs are high, which is a drain on finances, but also on time and energy. The roof is in a poor state and will, at some point in time, need more spending on it than we can currently afford. There is only one toilet, albeit to modern access standards, and insufficient space for meeting rooms and children's work.

Most of the congregation live within the area and local parking is tight but adequate – for special events the nursery school generally allow us to use their carpark.

4. Numerical Growth and Decline

I only have access to register entries for the last ten years. By memory, the late seventies and most of the eighties saw a time of growth at St John's. I'd guess in the mid-eighties congregations were well up on today's (in the mid-eighties?) with a far better age distribution.

The nineties seem to have been a time of slow decline, which seems to have accelerated during the noughties. By 2007/8 the regular Sunday congregation was down to the mid-thirties. After the then priest-in-charge left the numbers stabilised during the interregnum but showed minimal growth.

A community priest joined us in 2010 after which the 'base' congregation (ie excluding one-off visitors at 'specials' like baptism) rose to around fifty, plus many hundreds of visitors at such 'specials'. The community priest suffered a long period of illness and then left to go to another diocese, during which time congregations and visitors have fallen off. As at April 2016 the base congregation appears to be stabilising in the upper thirties, with average congregations in the mid-forties (38 and 47 respectively so far in 2016).

Weekday attendance is small - around 10 - and is mostly people who also come on Sundays. Recent joiners and leavers are mostly young families but also people who move into the area with their work, some of whom subsequently move back out again.

As a general trend, the numbers seem to vary according to the priest in charge, mapped onto an overall decline. One might suppose that God is trying to encourage the church to be more active and

outgoing, but in that case why would there be so little change when the congregation do precisely that?

In general it appears that our 'specials': baptisms, Christingle, Mothers' Day, Easter - services which carry a particular meaning - have been much more attractive than ordinary run-of-the-mill weekly worship. People who come to such services seem much more likely to come back to other 'special' services than to weekly worship.

5. Finance and leadership

St John's income is mostly from planned giving, followed by lesser amounts from collections and fund-raising events (fairs). Expenditure is mostly on Parish share followed by lesser amounts on fabric and running costs. Last year's accounts have shown a loss, which can be covered from savings; however that does not include provision for a very large repair bill for the roof which is going to have to be dealt with. This year we are expecting a larger loss, as there is a significant bill coming up for dealing with asbestos, and a couple of generous givers have moved out of the area.

A lot of work seems to have been done over the past five or six years to encourage everyone to give regularly to the church. This has been successful in terms of numbers who do give regularly; not so much in terms of the total amount. A high proportion of the congregation is retired, so the prevalence of giving relatively small amounts (the median is around £5/week) may be a widow's mite situation, or it might reflect an unreality around current costs; it's hard to tell. It is difficult to see the congregation covering even the basic running costs without a significant increase in numbers, particularly of those in employment.

There is a similar pattern with the congregation's active involvement in church activities. Most of the regular congregation are involved in some way – sidepeople, cleaning, choir, café, fairs, Sunday Club, etc – yet there remain critical roles unfilled: we are a short a warden, a treasurer, a planned giving officer, and people to help lead lay-led services, before we even begin to think about mission; also many rotas, such as servers, are running on barely enough people to operate.

Cooperation with other local churches and organisations has meant, though, that the café and cooking club have been able to continue.

Relationships with priests in charge have been troubled in recent years, although there does seem to be a good relationship with the current rector, and a lot of hope invested in the new 'Transition Minister', Penny, who starts work in June 2016.

6. Civil Society and Culture

On our timeline many positive memories were linked to Baptisms and weddings. Others included the dedication of the garden of remembrance, a confirmation preparation course by Rev Steven Rowe and the Community spirit at the Easter events of 2012. Sad memories related to people leaving the church and long periods when there wasn't a priest at St Johns. There was quite a lot of hope for the future, including the 3C's Cafe, the community garden and the outreach offered by the Cookery club. People felt positive about the support of the Rector, the lay preacher and other lay workers in the church.

The building is the primary symbol of the congregation's self-understanding; without that it is hard to see the congregation existing in anything like its current form. The primary ritual is the weekly

Sunday Eucharist; only one service a month is non-Eucharistic, and even that has caused controversy. Probably the best metaphor is the Community Cafe, which is inside the church building but welcomes many visitors from the local area. These seem to be the things that give life to the congregation.

The local community is one of high house prices but minimal community facilities. Several pubs in the area have closed in recent years, and there doesn't appear to be much church involvement with those that remain.

The Community Café and the Community Garden make St John's more accessible to the community. Community events like the Barn Dance invite the community to join us. Because we don't have pews, or other fixed seating, in the church building we are able to be more flexible in the events we put on than many churches.

7. Congregational Discovery Interviews

People are clearly very aware of the elderly nature of the congregation and the threat that poses to our future, although commitment to a need for significant change to address that seems patchy.

There appears to be a lot of encouragement gained from recent successes in outward-looking initiatives, such as the cafe, the cooking club, and the community garden. The attitudes underlying responses vary noticeably: many show a lot of hope and positivity, but are countered by a couple of rather negative sets. There does appear to be a lot of hope invested in the next priest being the one who will rescue us and bring better days.

Generally it looks as though the congregation, in spite of its weakness, has achieved a great deal over the past five years, particularly in looking outward, yet it is not obvious what, if anything, God is doing with that - the congregation clearly feels it is still in decline.

Some people have found changes to worship styles over the past few years challenging, others helpful. Several people speak of finding the 'one-offs' helpful: events which do not follow the usual pattern such as Requiems, Barn Dances and 'Once Upon A Tree', as well as Easter and Good Friday services. A few responses related to a sense of community, togetherness and shared achievement. There were a surprising number of comments about the importance of sermons/preaching.