

Vision Night – Thursday 25th February 2016

Following the Annual Business Meeting and reports back about youth, children, operations and welcome, Simon thanked a number of people personally before sharing the following thoughts with the Church:

Thank you all for your support and encouragement over the last 3 years, there have been some bumps along the way and I hope I've learnt some valuable lessons and thank you for sticking with me so far and I look forward to what God has for us in the future.

The last year has been enormously encouraging, it has had its challenges as every year will but once again the overall flavour has been incredibly positive for which I'm grateful to you and grateful to God.

A word that I do believe that God has given to us as a Church is flourishing and that we are to **Cultivate a Church where people flourish through connecting with God, each other and their world.**

At the end of last year a group of our leaders considered what it meant to flourish and as we spoke we identified three key elements that were present in our own experience when we were flourishing:

Belonging - we flourish when we are part of a community where we are known and know others who share life with us and celebrate with us, encourage us and support us in tough times.

Discovering and using our spiritual gifts - we flourish when we are in a place where we are using our spiritual gifts to serve God and others.

Living in Rhythm - we flourish when not just our work to life balance is right but when we are practising spiritual disciplines and have rhythms that cause our 'spiritual bucket' to overflow.

It is our hope that at Cogges we will create opportunities for all of the above to take place.

Before speaking of the future I want to share some of my highlights of the last year. The danger of sharing some highlights is that I miss out your particular highlights and I hope we have already covered yours in some of our presentations and discussions.

Church Weekend - this was a great opportunity to increase that sense of belonging in our community. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and we will repeat it, although not annually.

Christmas - there were some wonderful times of celebration and again we've had some fantastic comments. The Christingle making at the farm and Carols in the Barn were both extremely popular.

New Staff - we are wonderfully blessed to have made three excellent staff appointments.

Andy - It has been a huge encouragement having Andy on team and we've already heard of some of the incredible work he's done in the last few months to help us going forward.

Heidi - Is already making a great impact on our youth work and has spoken about the launch of the various youth activities which are producing fruit.

Kirsty - Is bringing ideas and energy to the Children's Church and the launch of Cogges Kids Crew has been particularly successful.

We're working hard on our culture of welcome and encouraging people to discover and use their spiritual gifts. We're also committed to trying to ensure that all volunteers feel valued and appreciated, as we couldn't do any of what we do without them. Heather is to be greatly thanked for much of our progress in this area.

The final achievement I want to mention of the last year is the completion of the purchase of the Old School House after 13 years of trying to work out what to do with it - it is ours.

Having completed on Phase 1 of the Beyond the Lychgate Project the question is what next?

You will remember that the plan was to extend the Church Centre to create a new hall for children's work and weekly community engagement. The reality is that I believe we've outgrown that plan of two years ago. It's obviously important we pay off the mortgage on the house, I believe it's important that we finish the car park (I don't know who is putting the big rocks along the verges to stop cars, they just keep appearing, however we're obviously upsetting someone in the community). I believe it's also important that we refurbish the Church Centre over time with a new kitchen and new toilets. Then we can move on to new doors inside that don't nearly kill you every time you take them down for Cogges Kids Crew or a Lent Lunch. Having talked to Keith, my proposal is that we look to do those things out of the money that has already been committed to the Beyond the Lychgate Project and from our general budget over the next few years. So tonight I'm suggesting that at this time I don't believe we should be building the extension to the Church Centre as we originally planned.

What do I believe for the future?

Well our giving has gone up by 23% last year, our electoral roll has increased by 14%, our average Sunday attendance is greater than last year. All of that is wonderful but creates a real problem as we seek to further reach the unconvinced with the message of God's love.

Firstly we mustn't take our growth for granted. After the recent General Synod a number of the national newspapers published the comments of John Spence the CofE's finance chief.

Previously, the church predicted that its decline in numbers was likely to continue for another five years before recovering.

But John Spence, the C of E's finance chief, said on Wednesday that the decline was expected to continue for another three decades, with today's figures of 18 people per 1,000 regularly attending church falling to 10 per 1,000. An 81-year-old was eight times more likely to attend church than a 21-year-old, he said.

"On all likely measures of success, given the demographics of the church, it is unlikely we will see a net growth in church membership within the next 30 years," said Spence. "I could have given you other facts, but I think you get the point."

The figures illustrate the challenge facing a church whose congregations are ageing as the millennial generation increasingly spurns organised religion.

I love the fact that we are bucking that trend. Witney is continuing to grow and part of the reason for our growth is that we are living in a growing town. Witney is going to continue to grow, there are 1000 houses being built in West Witney and potential plans for several hundred houses in our own parish.

We need to be praying and planning for future growth. I want us to continue to buck the trend and I believe that as we focus on health and flourishing we will grow naturally because flourishing things grow. I believe our growth will continue as we further engage with our community.

We do have a problem. If you arrive late at Cogges you can't park. If you have managed to park then someone said to me you have to enter through "the door of shame", you have to take the "walk of shame" and you end up in the Blake chapel sitting behind "the wall of shame" watching the service on the telly. They said "You may as well just phone in". Added to that if you've got a buggy where do you park it and then if you need the toilet during the service...well there's the Church Centre.

It's funny but it's true. Now if you're part of our Church family that's OK, you don't mind that, you know that's what happens, but if you're a new person arriving at 10.30am (the new people don't know you've got to get here early to get a seat) and maybe you want to explore faith from the back of the Church which is often where new people start - it doesn't really encourage you to return.

What's our response been so far. Well we've crammed Sunday full of services. We always have an 8am, 9.15am, 10.30am and 6.30pm, we're also running Cogges kids crew on Sunday afternoons, probably every other month and we have healing services four times a year. What I hope you don't see on a Sunday is the pressure on the teams in between services in getting things ready.

The same is true of the Church Centre as the kids team are setting up, space is a real issue. We are limited in the space that we can use during the week to develop community ministry and engagement. Right now we're being asked to get more involved in community engagement activities. I was recently contacted by a local asylum charity asking us to help refugees. We're being asked to be a part of an ecumenical response to some of the cuts threatening children's and health services. We need to be right in the heart of reaching and serving our local community. I could go on..

So here's the thought, here's the big idea - what if we were to build a new Church - a Church for the 21st century rather than the 12th Century? A new worship space that seats 3-500 people, ancillary rooms that are geared up for children's & youth on Sundays. However this wouldn't be a Sunday only building but rather one that was lived in all week, serving the community. Perhaps with a cafe or with gym space that could be used by the youth at weekends but had pilates classes for different ages during the week, maybe even a climbing wall up the side. Again I could go on and I probably will in a moment or two..

The first and most important thing to say about this is that if we are to go ahead it has to be God's plan, it can't be my or any one else's bright idea. Unless the lord builds the house we labour in vain. In a minute I want to share some initial encouragements that are certainly making me think we should explore this further.

The second thing and nearly as important - are you listening now – it's important you hear this. We would not, I repeat not, close sell or give away this building. We would continue to have worship services here, certainly the 8am and probably another morning one, as well as weddings, parish baptisms and funerals. If I get a phone call tomorrow afternoon from someone saying I hear you're going to flatten St Mary's and build a modern church on top of it, I will find out who started that rumour and I will come after you with a stick - forget grace and love.

Seriously this is really important, we will never close this Church for worship while I am vicar it is a wonderful building and place of prayer and worship and will remain so.

Moving on to how we've come to this idea. It came to a small group of us in November when we were praying, since then I've shared it with the PCC, and with the hub and connect group leaders.

One question I've been asking before sharing the idea is where do we want to be in 3-5 years and one thing has come through very clearly is that we want to be a Church that's at the heart of our community serving our community. If we go down this route it is for developing our community engagement not just our Sunday space.

One of the most exciting comments was when at one of these groups before saying anything of what we were thinking Martin Down said that he and Maureen had been praying and strongly thought that while our 12th Century Church

building was wonderful we needed to build a 21st Century one. He was then quite excited when I then shared what we were thinking.

I have spoken to the Bishop and Archdeacon and they are both fully supportive of us exploring this idea - they are however not offering to pay for it.

We have started investigating possible sites in the Parish and I have spoken with the owner of the land by the Windrush cemetery, about whether he would be open to us developing a church with community space on the corner by the traffic lights. This is one of the areas where it is possible that new housing might be developed. He is open to us making proposals to him to put in as part of a planning application at some stage in the not too distant future. As I say we're exploring any possible sites. The attraction of that site from the council's point of view is the cemetery has a tiny parking space and no chapel of rest. It's possible we could share parking and create a separate chapel within the new building that could be used during the week for those visiting graves and indeed for funerals. At the weekend it could be incorporated into the main worship space as the creche.

When I shared this idea with Roger & Jean and some other connect group leaders earlier this week, Jean was reminded that when they'd been prayer walking in the summer with Sue Perry they'd prayed at the lights because they felt it was a significant crossroads.

Can you imagine what it would be like if the first building you saw as you came into Witney at that significant crossroads was a Church on the hill?

I have spoken to one of our District councillors and one of our Town councillors and they are supportive of the idea. Next week I will be speaking to our other ward councillors and I would be grateful if you could keep the conversation about this within the Church family at this stage, as I would rather they hadn't heard rumours when I meet with them.

This afternoon Andy, Heather and I met with the West Oxfordshire District Council Strategic Director who has responsibilities for planning and we had an informative meeting in which she gave us some ideas to think about.

When I was asking the team what people would want to know tonight, Malcolm pointed out that you might like to know if Sue and I were planning to stick around if we launched this idea or cut and run.

I've tried to tell the Lord my plans before and His are sometimes different to mine but Sue and I have always been committed to being here for at least 10 years (we've been here for 3), we have no plans beyond that and if you still want us and the Lord hasn't said anything different we'll probably stay for another ten. I would be committed to staying the course of any building project.

The final thing to say is that even if we could start building tomorrow any project will take a significant period of time and in the meantime we will be looking at creative ways that we can continue to grow and minister to our community.

Tonight I share this with you for you to pray about, to talk about internally at the moment, for you to offer to get involved and to give ideas and comment. Obviously if any of you know a multimillionaire who likes building Churches do let me know, but my friends we're exploring what God might be calling us to together and this could be our call to get out of the boat.

We will create plenty of opportunities for questions, comments and concerns along the way and please do share your thoughts with me as you receive them.

Finally I met with Barbara & Gerald March this morning the final Connect Group Leaders that I wanted to share this with before tonight and Barbara had been praying about our meeting, she did have a bit of an idea what it was about but was led to Genesis 26v22:

19 Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there.**20** But the herdsmen of Gerar quarrelled with those of Isaac and said, 'The water is ours!' So he named the well Esek, because they disputed with him. **21** Then they dug another well, but they quarrelled over that one also; so he named it Sitnah. **22** He moved on from there and dug another well, and no one quarrelled over it. He named it Rehoboth, saying, 'Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.'

Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land - my prayer is that the Lord would give us room and we would flourish in the land.

Thank you for your support and friendship.

Following the meeting Simon was approached by a number of members who were present with these encouragements:

Martin & Maureen Down shared that when he was a Vicar in Norfolk and they built a new Church, on the wall in the foyer is written that verse from Genesis - the Lord has give us room and we will flourish in the land.

A younger member of the congregation approached Simon to say that he had been praying about this very issue for the last few months.

An older member of the congregation said that he also had been praying about this and that on Monday while he was worshipping, knowing nothing about this plan, he felt God say "I will give you a building".

Another member of the congregation said that she had been praying about the very field Simon was talking about 14 years ago.

We take these and other encouragements as we explore this possibility further and would ask for your ongoing prayers and discernment.