

**The Benefice of the Piddle Valley,
Hilton, Cheselbourne and Melcombe Horsey**

 **THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND**

DIOCESE OF SALISBURY

**The Revd Tony Monds
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Dear Bishop

Let us Talk

Thank you for your invitation to contribute to the diocesan debate under the title *Let us Talk*. Thank you too for your helpful video introduction.

The six PCCs of our benefice and one or two others who had accepted an open invitation to attend met last week to discuss the questions which you have asked us to consider.

What is the 'Personality and Character' of your local church?

We had been reminded how the readings for Easter 2 had portrayed two very different 'churches': a frightened demoralised group turned in on itself and meeting behind locked doors and a post Pentecost confident burgeoning church enjoying the goodwill of all the people and making such an impact that its leaders were being brought before the magistrates. We wondered where we were between those two poles, being satisfied that we were at neither end!

We like to think that we are welcoming, warm, hospitable and generous and enjoying the goodwill of our communities. We do however acknowledge that the view we take of ourselves might not be the same as the view held by an independent observer so we tried to find evidence.

The visitors' books in our church buildings invariably contain compliments - but would an unimpressed visitor write a disparaging comment or just leave with no trace of their visit? The comments that are left refer to the beauty and peace of the church building, how well it is kept and what a pleasure it is to find it unlocked and open.

Two of our churches are open 24 hours a day and leave blankets, a kettle, tea and coffee available for wayfarers who sometimes take shelter for the night. The porches of other churches have been used by wayfarers for shelter as well. One church even had a young man take up residence for a month or so until a more permanent solution to his housing needs could be met. He wasn't always out of his sleeping bag when divine worship began on a Sunday morning but the people of that community made light of it and were undoubtedly generous and hospitable, providing him with hot food and other assistance.

The church buildings are seen as the focal points in our communities, particularly in those where there may be no other public building. The local community would be devastated if anything were to happen to the building and many who may not worship regularly nevertheless contribute towards its upkeep. There seems to be an expectation that there should be a Christian presence in each community and that worship should continue in the church even if those who expect it do not attend themselves. They perhaps like to feel that prayer is being offered and that significant moments and life events can be marked by a Christian service. Others use our church buildings as places to pray and contemplate during the week. We feel that there is a fair amount of goodwill towards the church.

As to whether we are warm in personality, we perhaps did not reach a conclusion. There is probably always more that can be done in that area.

What are the priorities of your local church? Is there one thing you would like to take on in the coming year (recognising that may mean you may need to stop doing something else)? Are there ways in which we can work together to achieve more?

Our benefice of six parishes is really made up of two groups of three parishes grouped in two north/south running Dorset valleys joined by one east/west lane of a little under five miles in length. In the normal business of travelling to shops, surgeries and schools, there would be no reason for someone in one valley to cross into the other. Indeed, the journey is rarely made. The feeling of separation is also marked by the circulation of two community magazines which serve configurations of parishes to which the constituent parishes of our benefice used to belong. The only common publication is the weekly pew sheet but that doesn't reach even all the faithful if they are not in church on a particular Sunday. Perhaps it should be posted on community websites and circulated electronically to as many as possible.

Within our own small communities, as in most rural settings, we feel that we are good at caring for each other – 'you have only to sneeze and the whole village knows.' Church members are engaged in much voluntary community service through our two schools, toddler groups, lunch clubs and surgeries.

Many feel that it is important as a general rule to have a service in each parish every Sunday – 'steadfastly maintaining worship'. We recognise that there are a variety of tastes to be catered for and, while children should be at the heart of everything we do, some BCP worship is unlikely to appeal to them while satisfying the needs of other generations. We try to provide a range of worship including more informal occasional services (not always in a church building) which can attract those who do not attend regularly or only at major festivals or who, for whatever reason, may find going through a church door an intimidating experience.

One example of one of these more informal occasions was a Sunday afternoon of hymn singing in one of our village churches where people were asked to nominate their favourite hymn which was then sung by those present aided by a relay of three organists, an opera singer and the choir from one of the local church schools. Many came who do not often come but our regular congregation has not been increased as a result. For some of us this does not particularly matter since goodwill was engendered and the event is seen as part of a long process of engagement. For others, it was not felt to be true worship (the primary purpose of the church building) and could as well have taken place anywhere.

Despite the variety we try to offer, we still do not succeed in meeting the needs of everyone as a would be churchgoer told us at a recent APCM. We need to engage with her and people like her (families with teenage children) in perhaps devising another style of worship which may mean that something currently on our monthly rota will have to go.

We are conscious of the needs of the children of our benefice and, on three Sundays each month, run a Family Service. We are agreed that it would be better for the sake of critical mass and the sense of reassurance that a larger gathering can give to newcomers (as well as encouragement to

regulars) if two of those services which take place in one of the valleys were to be united. What we seem unable yet to agree upon is how and where that combination should be achieved. That might be a priority for the coming year!

The argument for critical mass could apply to much of our other worship. Two parishes do share a service once a month but it has to be said that the combined congregation does not match the aggregate of the two local congregations. We recognise that, in the main, we are reluctant to travel between parishes, perhaps out of a sense of (misguided?) loyalty to our own parish. Sometimes we may not go to church even in our own parish if the service doesn't suit us even though there may be well be a service which does suit us in an adjoining parish. Perhaps the breaking down of parochialism may be another priority. We feel we know it is and that we would probably achieve more working together but nevertheless smile sheepishly at the thought of actually trying to achieve it!

There was a view that full churches are those where there is a sense of expectation and excitement, where Christ is at the centre, where there is powerful preaching and where healing takes place. Our lack of numbers may indicate that we are failing in these areas.

Others remembered that in years gone by they enjoyed more of a sense of community in church, more of a family feel. This may need to be rediscovered.

Yet others pointed to the 'success' of Holy Trinity Brompton and wondered whether the running of Alpha and a change in the style of music would lead to greater numbers in church.

It was suggested that the success of our church school in providing opportunities for worship during the week might mean that parents felt that their children got enough at school and that there was no need for church on Sunday. There was discussion as to whether we should try to provide after school clubs so that if rugby practice on a Sunday morning meant that children might miss church, they could at least have Sunday on another day of the week. Others felt that Sunday was effectively a day of obligation for Christians.

We may need to make more provision for our 'invisible' mid week congregations – those who visit our churches for spiritual refreshment.

In many of our villages, the church building is the only public building and we try to encourage its use for community events: concerts (across a variety of musical styles), folk festivals, flower festivals, venue for the parish meeting etc. None of them has kitchen or toilet facilities. Some do not have a water supply. While heating and lighting in some are better than in others, they are not good in any of our ancient buildings. All have pews although in one church they are not fixed. While recognising that it is a topic that can polarise communities for and against, a certain re-ordering is probably required if greater community use is to be made of the buildings – let alone if they are to become more attractive and comfortable places for worship.

Because we often under-describe ourselves, how can we best measure the quality and impact of church life?

There was a view that we live in a society obsessed with measuring everything!

We are not sure that the obvious measure of numbers was necessarily the right one.

It was suggested that we could look at statistics such as the number of baptisms compared to the number of births.

We were flagging a bit by this stage!

So your questions have - perhaps as intended - raised more questions for us which we will no doubt continue to debate during the coming year. We are determined to 'fight on with commitment despite our small numbers', 'trying hard with our limited resources', to continue to be 'strivers'.

We look forward to hearing the results of your consultation reported back from the Diocesan Synod.

Yours sincerely,

Tony Monds