

Vicar's Address to the Annual Parochial Church Meeting, 27 April 2014

My copy of "An ABC for the PCC" says that while there is no legal requirement for a Vicar's report at an APCM, it is a good opportunity to do 3 things. These are i) review the past year; ii) thank people; and iii) "present a plan or vision for the coming year". Obviously, having been in the job just over two weeks, I can't really review the past year with any authority. Equally, I can only offer a general thank you to everyone for welcoming me so warmly to the Parish. But I can do something about the third purpose for a Vicar's report – a "plan or vision for the coming year". As I approach this next year for St Peter's, I'm filled with a happy optimism. This is truly a wonderful parish, filled with gifted people willing to do their best for the God they serve.

What exactly is it that a Parish Church should do? One of the simplest expressions comes from St John. "God is love and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them" (1 John 4:16). That is St John's version of what it is like when Christ is present in a community: at its heart will be self-sacrificial love, and it will feel like God's home - like heaven on earth. St Peter's has made Christ present to the people of Harborne over many centuries. Our task in this generation is to carry on that work.

But how, in this generation, do we best do that? After all, St Peter's is a busy, lively church, with plenty going on. People are already working hard. If you were a St Peter's stalwart, you might think – "what more can I do?" Well, at first sight, I don't want to change much of the substance of what we do. What I want to do is sharpen the focus of the picture we present to people; to make it clear, when anyone looks at the work of St Peter's, that here Christ is present, here is self-sacrificial love, and here it is God's home, and heaven on earth.

Our Bishop's buzzword these days is "intentionality". Now, our dear old Bishops are easy to mock; and so is the technical psychobabble of modern business. And we may hear the word "intentionality" and smile – what is he going on about now? But I think the Bishop is on to something here. Once upon a time, it is true, the Anglican Church was powerful not just by virtue of being the Established Church; but also because it had many committed adherents. Since the First World War, the numbers of those truly committed to it have dwindled. Yes, it's true that 59% of respondents in the 2011 census declared themselves to be Christian. But that's down from 71% in 2001. And the fact is that even those apparently encouraging figures mask a more general lack of commitment. 59% say they're Christian, in answer to the question "What is your religion?" But the percentage attending Church of England services regularly is not quite 59%! Our Diocese of Birmingham has around 1.5 million people in it. Average attendance in 2011 on a Sunday morning was around 14000. That's slightly less than 1%. It's not unrepresentative of the national picture.

And yet one in four primary schools is C of E; and one in sixteen secondary schools. If atheist critics are right, and religion spreads by brain-washing the young, all that can be said is that Anglicans aren't very good at it. We Anglicans have had the advantage of these schools. We've also had a long and proud history of ministering to people at key moments in their lives (so-called "Hatch, Match, Dispatch" ministry – baptisms, marriages and funerals). We've had hundreds of well-attended carol services, nativity plays, flower festivals, Remembrance Sundays, Harvest Festivals. Over the last hundred years, Anglican Churches have done their work beautifully and prayerfully and generously. And yet clearly those who are well-disposed but uncommitted far outnumber those who are fully engaged. Why is that? I think it is partly because of a lack of "intentionality".

Doing what we do with "intentionality" means remembering WHY we're doing it. Why are we in church on a Sunday morning? Why are we giving so much of our time or talents or money to the church? Why am I singing in the choir, or helping with Junior Church, or arranging the flowers, or reading or acting as a sidesperson? Why are we involved with St Peter's school? Why are we hosting this baptism, wedding or

funeral? Why are we collecting for Christian Aid? Why are working in the church, the Parish Office, the Hall? What is our intention? Whatever we're doing at St Peter's, if we're doing it with "intentionality" we'll remember that we're doing it to make Christ present in the world, that we're doing it in the cause of self-sacrificial love. In the past, perhaps out of a very English sense of squeamishness or discretion, people haven't wanted to trumpet their faith. They haven't wanted to proclaim the religious motive behind what they do. Sometimes they've done vaguely religious things without any specific motive – because their parents did, or because they feel they ought to, or because they sort of got roped in and couldn't get out. Well, I don't care how you got here. But I do want you to do what you do for God. My vision for SPH is that we follow St Paul's advice: whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of Christ Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).

If we do what we do with that intention, there are many benefits. I believe we'll do better what we already do. I believe we'll have more of a chance of showing people why we do what we do, and thus we'll have more of a chance of getting them to join us. I believe we'll focus our efforts better in achieving particular ends – we'll harness our energy and our resources more efficiently. I believe we'll be ready to change, because it'll no longer be enough to say "Why do we do this? Because we've always done it." I believe we'll have fewer of the squabbles that so often break out in churches, and which make us so unattractive to some people, particularly in the younger generation.

But most of all, I think it will help us be happy. Mike Smith, our Transforming Church consultant, said something that hit home when he talked to me. He said that a church is often seen as an organization that takes more than it gives. Isn't that true? Here comes the Vicar: what does he want now? Does he want my money? Does he want my time? Does he want to rope me in to something when my heart's not in it? Now – of course, part of the job of any Priest is to teach and encourage; and often that means to cajole and dragoon. And of course many of you will see me coming over the next few years – and yes, you'll be right, I'll want something. But whatever it is I'll ask you to do, I'll want very much more for you to be happy as a member of SPH. And whatever I ask you for in terms of your money and time, I will have tried to make sure that the church is in credit with you already because of what it gives you in its worship and its common life.

Of course, there are more practical matters on my mind. Our giving is not what it should be, and it has fallen dramatically in recent times. We need to be better at fund-raising. Our buildings need attention, and we need to make best use of our capital and our assets. We have many great people helping with the church. But we're like a football club with a great first XI but a rather thin squad. We need more. We need to do more for young people. We need to do more with the great resource that is our Junior Church. I could go on. But I believe that before we tackle all of these practical problems, we need to get our "intentionality" right.

Matthew 6:33: Strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Rev. Graeme Richardson