

Dear Friends,

I wish you all the joys of the Easter Season.

My Vicar's letter this month is an edited version of some of what I said at our Annual Parochial Church Meeting on March 16th. I wanted to share it all with you here, because I took the opportunity on that occasion to look ahead as well as to look back, and I would like to enlist as many of you as possible in the thinking we shall be doing in order to produce a 'Mission Action Plan' for St Mark's – of which, more below.

This is something of what I said:

'Last year at the APCM I suggested that we might as a church undertake a thorough 'Mission Audit', leading to a reassessment of our priorities, so that we could act strategically in everything we plan and do for the Lord

Nearly one year on, what has become of that project? Most of you will remember that last autumn I was talking and writing about 'The Seven Marks of a Healthy Church' – a framework for a church's self-assessment that has been tried, tested and refined in various other parts of the Church of England. Members of the PCC went away for a day together last October to look at St Mark's through the lens of this concept. We came back with various half-formed ideas and suggestions of what we might change, or do better. Since then, the PCC has undertaken to look at one topic raised on that day away at each meeting, and come forward with firm proposals as to things we might change. Because the PCC only meets bi-monthly, this is going to be a slow process! So it may well seem to other members of the Parish that things have 'gone quiet' on this front. But that quietness won't last for long! We already have some concrete proposals, relating to one topic, which I shall discuss below. But first let me digress to put all this in a wider context:

Next year (2009) is the 900th anniversary of the Diocese of Ely. To celebrate this, each parish or group of parishes is being asked to undertake just such a process as we have begun – doing a 'mission audit', and coming-up with a 'Mission Action Plan', as a result of it. Indeed, the 'Healthy Churches handbook', with its 'Seven Marks' concept is one of the tools recommended to parishes of our diocese in the preparation of 'Mission Action Plans'. So, in a way, we are slightly ahead of the game! The hope is that by the end of this year each parish will have completed its 'Mission Action Plan', and be ready to 'present it' symbolically in the Cathedral at a great diocesan celebration next year.

It seems to me important that as much of the congregation as possible feels involved in our thinking, praying and planning. For this reason, the PCC and I have decided that between Easter and Pentecost there will be a sermon series on 'The Seven Marks of A Healthy Church' at the main, 10 am service, culminating with an invitation to everyone to share their own prayerful assessment of St Mark's 'health' and the way we should be going, on Trinity Sunday (May 18th). (The form of that invitation will be made clear then.) Meanwhile the newly elected PCC will continue working on the ideas thrown-up by last year's Awayday, incorporating thoughts coming from the rest of the congregation in the meantime. At some point in the Autumn I envisage another PCC Day Away, when our 'Mission Action Plan' can be finalised ready for next year.

But now I must turn to proposals which the PCC has already *begun* to formulate under one heading. And that is the heading of 'Welcome':

We felt in the PCC that St Mark's is probably pretty good at welcoming newcomers to services. But there should be no room for complacency. One issue that does arise is that it's sometimes hard for the clergy to find a passing parishioner who's willing to escort a newcomer over to coffee and introduce them to others. Another issue is that our sidespeople, working in pairs, are pretty busy handing-out books at the beginning of a service, and collecting them in at the end. They do it well, with lots of smiles, but they can't always help a newcomer find a seat or feel at home. For these reasons the

PCC would like to suggest that for the 10 am service we see if we can get enough sidespeople on our list to be able to put three on the rota each week – the third having a particular brief to be a ‘welcomer’ in the more free-ranging sense, and to be available to take people over to coffee.

Another issue is that newcomers come to us from many different cultures – and sometimes our natural British reserve can be mistaken for being unwelcoming. In particular, in many countries, invitations to eat in other people’s homes – even *spontaneous and immediate* invitations are a very normal and regular part of church life. Here, where we are often so busy with our own families and concerns, we can give the impression of being unwelcoming or cold because we don’t naturally have a more ‘open door’ policy. Whilst it’s not practical or desirable to exhort each other to change our household patterns on most Sundays, the PCC suggests that different groups within the church (e.g. the choir, SMYG, the working groups, the Flower Arrangers - the clergy and lay ministers, even!) might each like to consider taking on perhaps one Sunday in the year when they corporately prepare a meal, enjoy each other’s company, and keep spare places to which newcomers or people on their own may be invited at short notice. Such meals might either be in homes, or in the Hall – following the model that the Young Adults’ group so successfully uses. If enough groups were prepared to do this, there might be at least one such welcoming lunch a month, to which newcomers could be asked. Eating together is a very important Christian experience. We enjoy it when we do it on those occasions which the Social Committee and the Visitors’ Group so successfully arrange: can we extend the net a bit wider to make the experience more regular within the life of St Mark’s?

A third issue is that our excellent ‘Visitors’ Packs’ are perhaps not getting out into the parish enough. The idea is that if a St Mark’s person sees signs of new occupation in a house or flat in the parish, they should pick up a pack from the hymn-book cupboard, note the address it is going to in the record book, and take it round to the new arrivals, with a cheery smile and a word of welcome to Newnham.

These are ideas which it would be good if people could discuss a bit over the next month or so, and then we could see if they can be put into operation and made part of our longer-term ‘Mission Action Planning’.

I am not ending with them because they are the most important, or the only things we may decide need to be done in the future – simply because they are the topics most recently discussed at the PCC. And I’m stopping now because this report is threatening to get longer than last year’s – which was already long enough!

Well – that’s the kernel of what I said at the APCM. With this magazine you will find details of the sermons series on The Seven Marks of a Healthy Church which begins on March 30th. I do hope as many as possible ‘St Mark’s folk’ will come and ‘think with us’ about these matters.

Your friend and Vicar,