

The Vicar's Letter

Dear Friends,

By the time you read this members of the clergy, the PCC, together with Licensed and Accredited lay Ministers (i.e. Roger Baker, the Reader, Tim and Hannah Hupfield and Barbara Nunns) and our attached ordinands will have spent a day away together, reflecting on the 'health' of our church life, and the degree to which we are effectively turned outwards towards our community. (Margaret Banks, our Visitors' Group leader, is of course also an Accredited Lay Minister, but sadly she will not have been able to be with us for the day.)

The concept of a 'healthy church' originated in the Diocese of Durham where, a few years ago, an analysis was made of church statistics. It was found that, in common with much of the country, there had been a decline in attendance; but that in a significant group of parishes, there had been growth, almost exactly mirroring the statistics of decline elsewhere. It was decided to call together representatives of these growing churches, to try to discover what it was they had in common. The answer was, surprisingly, not that they all very consciously saw themselves to be evangelistic churches; nor that they all shared the same type of churchmanship and theology, nor the same style of leadership. Some were urban, some suburban, and some rural. In other words – they were about as varied as they could be. Yet, after a great deal of conversation and reflection, seven 'marks' were discovered which they shared.

These came to be known as the 'Marks of a Healthy Church', because in nature, 'health' and growth go together. And we do seek growth – for God's sake.

The 'seven marks' have been refined by application to churches in other dioceses than Durham, and 'The Healthy Churches Handbook' has been published, to help elaborate and explain in more detail what the 'marks' mean in practice. This book provides a well-respected grid against which parishes are invited to measure themselves, in order to pray for God's. These are the seven marks that the churches shared:

- 1) They were energised by faith rather than just keeping things going or trying to survive.
- 2) They had an outward-looking focus, with a 'whole life' rather than just a 'church life' concern.
- 3) They were seeking to find out what God wants – that is, trying to discern the Spirit's leading, rather than simply trying to please everyone.
- 4) They were ready to face the cost of change and growth rather than resisting change and fearing failure.
- 5) They operated as a community rather than functioning as a club or religious organisation.
- 6) They aimed to make room for all, seeking to be inclusive rather than exclusive.
- 7) They tended to do a few things and do them well, being focused rather than frenetic.

Our 'PCC Awayday' has been the beginning of a process in which I hope members of all our congregations will become involved in reflecting on our priorities and the way we follow them. I hope we shall all catch the vision of a 'healthy church' and share together in the prayers, decisions and actions which will help us become 'healthier'. The PCC and ministry team will be sharing the results of our deliberations in a variety of ways with you over the coming months, so that together we can find ways to take the issues further.

Of course, the metaphor of 'health' chimes in with one of our society's biggest secular preoccupations. We all hear regularly from the media and government agencies how we could lead healthier lives. Many of us try to follow the advice we receive. This is good.

But, in the end, it's about self-concern, and we who are relatively very privileged may find it much easier to follow health-guidelines than people who suffer the constraints of poverty, poor education and low self-esteem.

Seeking to be a 'healthier' church is a different matter. It's about seeking the good of others and the glory of God, rather than anything for ourselves. I don't say this to suggest that the people of St Mark's are less than generous and committed. I have come to know you as a community full of Christians who are very serious about their faith. If we 'score' ourselves against the 'seven marks', there are some categories, I'm sure, in which we'll score well. But, for the sake of God's purposes, we must not rest content nor become complacent. There may be much we still have to learn through the conversation, reflection and prayer which I hope the 'Healthy Church' assessment will provoke.

Can I invite you – all of you members of St Mark's who read this, whether you're able to be 'active', or for some reason are more restricted in what you can physically do – to keep the list of the 'Seven Marks of a Healthy Church' in the place where you most often pray, throughout the month of November, and hold St Mark's up to God in the light of them as often as possible? If any insights or inspirations come to you out of this praying, please pass them on to me, or any member of the PCC or ministry team, and we shall do our best to make sure they are part of the continuing review of church life as it goes on.

Your friend and vicar,

Maggie Guite