

The Axe Valley Mission Community

Notes from the Parish Visioning Day - 21 October 2017

Please recognise that these are overview notes of the day and can only give a flavour of the range of discussions and the outcomes.

The purpose of the notes is :

- **to provide a brief record of the day**
- **to share the essence of the thoughts and discussions of the day**
- **to encourage all of us to continue to take to God in prayer our desire to discern his direction and leading for our churches and community**
- **to encourage further consideration of the issues covered and outcomes by those who were present and those who were unable to attend in person**
- **to provide a facility for feedback about the priorities we should be addressing in order to grow God's work in our Mission Community**

53 members of the Mission Community took part in some or all of the event at the Baptist Church, Kilmington. We were particularly grateful to those at 'The Beacon' for the welcome we received and for their generosity in allowing us to use their facilities. We would express particular thanks to Colin Frier, a guest from Nottingham, who helped to facilitate several aspects of the event. We were also grateful to all who contributed to the day and its practicalities. The refreshments and the resources made available for the various activities were very much appreciated.

Purposes of the day :

- fellowship for members of the Mission Community – to have fun together
- to review the strengths and achievements of the Mission Community
- to consider areas of priority to be addressed and developed in order that we achieve success and move forward in God's work in the Mission Community
- to begin the process of developing an effective, agreed and accessible Mission Action Plan to guide our future work and focus as a Mission Community

The first planned activity of the day was a short quiz about some obscure facts concerning our Mission Community. Working in twos and threes members talked through the matters covered – eg “What is the length of the perimeter of the Mission Community?” and “How many cups of tea and coffee are served within our churches each month?”. Clive used this quiz as the basis of an introductory talk about the fact that working together, reflecting, questioning and challenging each other hones our accuracy and effectiveness in addressing minor enquiries and helps us to get a better understanding and answers than we might as individuals working in isolation. This is often also true as we seek to understand and discern God's message and direction for us. Working, reflecting, praying and seeking to discern God's will is usually best achieved together rather than in isolation. Clive indicated that our Visioning Day is a stage in this process of collaborating in our search to recognise God's will for us in the imperative to be a successful, active, growing Mission Community serving God and His people.

Father Geoff then led us in a beautiful and worshipful Communion Service. We were grateful to all who took part and to Eva Schofield for playing for the service.

Workshop 1

In small groups of 4 or 5 we took part in an activity workshop. Each group had an A3 picture showing a sailing boat floating along and a variety of sticky notes. On the smooth water the groups were asked to record the things which they consider to be strengths of the churches in the Mission Community – things worthy of continuing or developing further. After some good discussions the following were recorded (condensed into general statements – where covered by more than one group, frequency in brackets) :

- Churches open and accessible
- Community presence in activities and events (2)
- Beautiful, well maintained buildings and grounds (3)
- Hospitality – refreshments, coffee mornings, harvest suppers etc
- Social Events (3)
- Special events (2)
- Prayer – regular and special prayer sessions, cards and variety of formats
- Openness to a variety of worship styles and approaches
- Services each week in each of our churches (3)
- People recognising, responding and being supported in their ‘calling’ (2)
- Friends/supporters groups - wider than church membership
- Broad team of clergy and lay leaders (2)
- Music – organists and musicianship within the church teams / concerts
- The effective and strong Axminster Christians Together (ACT)
- High quality special services – especially Dementia Friendly, weddings, funerals, Team services
- Pastoral care – home communions, visits and services to residential homes
- School links (2)
- Newsletters /magazines communicating with the whole community

In the blue sky part of the picture groups were asked to record things which they believe we should aim for – new or challenging areas of work to improve our effectiveness and achievements – aspirational goals :

- Improved and flexible facilities including church halls/re-ordering some churches (2)
- Offering more variety and times of service
- Develop work with children and families – make church more ‘fun’ for them (4)
- Reaching out more effectively to our communities and being relevant to those not yet engaged with church (5)
- Increase links and engagement with schools (2)
- Use our existing facilities more creatively (2)
- Improve communication – within the church community and to the wider community – using modern and electronic media

- Develop music and choirs further
- Become more 'mission' minded
- Engage better with end of life support
- Increase numbers worshipping and contributing to the work of the church (2)
- Introduce more specific activities and groups eg mens & womens breakfasts/meetings/prayer groups

The picture showed hidden rocks under the water. Groups were asked to consider the problems to our progress :

- Some perceived reluctance to fully engage with new ideas
- The limitations of our buildings in relation to flexibility, comfort and adaptability (2)
- Red tape and bureaucracy undermining enthusiasm and progress (2)
- Aging population – not enough younger people – especially rurally
- Social changes and attitudes – more materialistic society/busyness (2)
- Not yet a sense that mission and evangelism is the responsibility of us all (3)
- Restricted and limited resources – human and financial (2)
- Lack of clergy
- Tensions between needs of individual churches and commitment to the overall Mission Community
- The need for further musical developments, variety and confidence
- Co-ordination of our pastoral links to ensure that our best practice is offered to all
- Our need to attract new people to our churches and help them to feel fully engaged in what we are about
- Lack of variety in our service pattern and liturgy
- Disillusionment

Over Lunch

As well as enjoying a great lunch people were encouraged to explore the 'Beacon' church building – a wonderful asset to church and community and a fantastic place to worship and superb base for Christian mission and ministry.

It was really good to share in lunch and fellowship but we were also able to have a little bit of fun playing around with some suggested updates for our Axe Valley Mission Community logo. We received some interesting and thought-provoking suggestions and we will get some of these mocked up for consideration.

Workshop 2

After the break we began an exercise intended to focus our thinking on the aspects of Mission Community development and which might be considered to have the most significance as we plan to progress and move forward in our mission and ministry. We were encouraged to think about the overall priorities for the Mission Community whilst recognising that individual churches still have their own work and community presence to maintain.

Colleagues worked in groups of eight and each group was given a pack of 40 cards with statements written on them. The statements related to general areas of mission and ministry.

The cards were dealt face down to the individual and group members. Each person was then asked to discard the two cards which they thought were the least appropriate in their view to the mission and ministry of the Mission Community. Having retained the three which they thought were most significant each person turned to work with a partner - each pair now having six statement cards. Through discussion and negotiation they were asked to discard three statements and retain three. They were then asked to join with another pair, so that again they had six statement cards. The four were then asked to go through the same process and retain three statements. The groups then joined together again with six agreed statements which they were asked to discuss and reduce to four cards - and then to put these into priority order.

There was a remarkable degree of consensus in the feedback as each group was asked to share their top four priorities :

- All three groups included as a priority (though not necessarily their highest) - to serve and engage better with our communities and their needs
- All three groups included amongst their priorities the holding of frequent events to attract those outside the church, especially young people and families
- Two groups put as their top priority **Statement 25** – ‘Seek ways to involve everyone more and improve our communications’

the other priorities which were recorded included :

- To increase the diversity and relevance of worship across the mission community
- To improve the physical 'welcome' of our buildings
- To have a 'think tank' to explore practical and achievable ideas for our parishes to try
- To provide more and varied 'church' social events to better engage with people

Workshop 3

Our final workshop took the diocesan vision statement and adapted it to fit our own Mission Community. We were therefore working with the mission statement :

Growing in Prayer
Making new disciples
Serving the people of the Axe Valley with joy

As a strapline this is simple, clear and highly appropriate to the diocese and to our mission. Each group was therefore provided with a grid and were asked to write their 4 statements of priority across the top and the mission statements down the side. They were then asked to consider some of the practical things which might be undertaken to bring about real change and the achievement about priorities in these three areas. The outcomes represented some creative and positive suggestions which included (grouped together where appropriate) :

- Improved use of local media to publicise church activities
- The establishment of a regular mission community 'pew news' sent out weekly by e-mail :
- Each church having a prayer tree/board/cards
- New styles of service at different times of the day and week
- More involvement with schools
- Better use of social media
- Asking our communities what they want and seeking to respond
- Adapting our buildings to put people at their ease and feel welcome
- Give ourselves more 'quiet time' and opportunity for reflection
- Exemplify that God and the church are fun - give ourselves more to smile about
- Be relevant to young people
- Get involved with youth groups and support them with time and resources
- Try a 'pop-up prayer tent' on the Minster green
- Straightforward service sheets and good music which make people feel welcome and at ease
- Engage young people in doing things in, and with, the church
- Provide opportunities for people to come to informal groups in church - so they can talk and know that someone is listening after bereavement, illness or social difficulties
- To recognise the needs of the community/individuals and to find ways to help
- Encourage people to learn and understand more about faith
- Become more confident in talking about faith and the ministry of the Holy Spirit

Afternoon worship

Tracey then led everyone in worship. This was an extremely positive and enjoyable session in 'the round' which included singing, reading and prayer. Representatives of each of our six churches let sections of the prayers, and the worship concluded with each person being given a blue heart-shaped bead to take away and use as a reminder of the day and the stimulus to further prayer.

The afternoon concluded with a cream tea and an opportunity for further discussion and fellowship.

In Conclusion

It is requested that each person should reflect upon the day prayerfully, consider these notes, respond to the matters raised, and shares with others the outcomes and joys of the day. One of the final comments which was reiterated by several was that we should look to build on the Visioning Day by holding a follow on event in early in 2018 and that each person should seek to 'bring a friend' so that we can better get to know each other across our six churches and grow and develop as a Mission Community.

Clive Sedgewick

November 2017

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Making new disciples
Serving the people of the Axe Valley with joy***