

VISION UPDATE – address given by the Vicar at Michaelmas 2013

We have spent some time thinking about our vision over the past few years, and this is one of my twice-yearly updates on how things are going.

We are a growing church, and our vision should be that of a growing church: growing in faith; in our outreach into our community; and in numbers.

To support all that we do now and wish to do in the future, we launched our sound and multimedia project earlier this year, and it met with a very generous and enthusiastic response. Many, many thanks again to all of you who have supported it. The whole project has currently raised £25,000 which covers everything needed for the sound system, and goes a good way towards the multimedia developments too. The improvements to microphone and the sound desk in its temporary housing has already made a big improvement, and we hope the PCC will be able to agree the plans in January for installation of the remaining facilities soon afterwards.

Another area of the church in great need of improvement is the parish room. It is a public face of the church, for anyone who comes here for a meeting, rehearsal, or who walks through after taking Holy Communion: unfortunately, it has seen better days, and the lack of storage space leads to ever-present clutter. Two generous gifts are allowing us to thoroughly redecorate and re-order the room to make it worthy of a room in God's house: it will be attractive, tidy and suited to all the many current uses of the room, and new ones that develop in the future. When the re-ordering is done, I then hope we will be able to replace some of the stackable chairs and tables with lighter and more comfortable models. As part of the re-ordering, we'll move the priest's vesting area from its unusual position at the back of church into the parish room. This will create a space in church that can be used for refreshments; we'll still use the hall after 9:30 of course, but the refreshments after Toddle Up, Praise@11 and so on are very popular and a dedicated serving area is another key development to support the growth of those congregations.

So there we have two exciting ongoing projects to improve the church's facilities. The recent five-yearly report from our church architect confirmed that the church is kept in first-class condition by our Estates Committee, and we are relieved that no major repairs are forecast! And this week, the path around the Garden of Remembrance will be remade and improved, again thanks to the generosity of a donor.

Thinking about Outreach for a moment, our services continue to draw in more people from our local community; recently we've seen a lot of growth at 11 o'clock baptisms, Toddle Up, and the new Praise@11. At November's Praise@11 the focus will be on Operation Christmas Child, in which participants are invited to fill a shoebox with small gifts for a child who would otherwise receive nothing at Christmas. We won't be holding a charity gift day with stalls and activities this year because no-one is available to organize it; but there will be an opportunity

to contribute to charities, including Operation Christmas Child, at the end of November at a simpler event.

Those words highlight the great importance of volunteers. Many people here now put a great deal of time, skill, and love into this church, and that is the only reason we can do what we do, and why we can think of doing more. But there are some really important areas of church life where we do need more people to offer a little time: something regular, or on an occasional or one-off basis. The sheet of paper you should have been handed has more information: please do take it away and read it through. There might be something you might enjoy getting involved in; or you might know of someone who would; and even if not, please do pray that more people are inspired to get involved in these various ways in our church.

Looking to the months ahead, there are two more developments I want mention. Firstly, the breaking news is that new Ewell Castle school music staff are starting a chapel choir, who will use St Mary's as their base to perform in. Jonathan has already got involved, and we hope there will be mutual benefit between our choir and music department and the new developments at the school– we might see choral scholars from the school singing with our choir, or even the whole Chapel Choir coming to sing here on occasion. Watch this space, but it is sounding very exciting. Secondly, in the coming months I want us to increase the times during which the church is open. We'll be opening the church on Saturday mornings for a few weeks as part of Operation Christmas Child so that people can drop off their shoe-boxes of gifts. Then early next year, I'd like us to start with a weekly time, even just an hour or two, when the church is regularly open. It is said, when churches are open, great things start to happen.

We've used the phrase "vision 2020" to talk about our church vision, because it is not just about the next few months but about the next few years, looking towards the end of this decade. Will we still be a flourishing, growing, church? I hope and pray and believe that we will. We cannot know what God has in mind for us, but there are a few dreams I want to share with you. Before I do, though, reflect on what we have been able to do together even in the short time since I have known you all. New events, from Café NESLOT, through children's fun days, to yesterday's Parish Day; new kinds of services appealing to young and old; a whole new choir; new faces welcomed to our congregations; new disciples brought to Christ. Look back at that, and we realise, yes, it's ok to dream dreams, to expand our horizons and dare to imagine what God might have in store.

So looking through the next few years, I hope we will see many new kinds of gifts and ministries in our congregations: is there a future priest or lay reader sitting in this church today? Is there an idea forming in someone's mind this morning which may take root and grow into another great success story for St Mary's? I hope that, following on from the sound system and parish room projects we will continue to improve our facilities. Perhaps the biggest further improvement I can think of for St Mary's for the future is something prosaic and practical: better loos. As we look to welcome more people of all ages at services and other occasions, we will have to face the fact that the current provision could do with

major improvement. My training incumbent, when I was a curate, used to say that through his career he could never get churches to grow until they got the loos right! And dreaming still more, I know that this church once owned a curate's house. I hope that we will do so again, to house a curate, or a youth worker, or whatever the needs of the day may be. These are dreams, if you like, but not idle fancies. Churches up and down the country are growing, building, expanding– we are a growing church, and the greatest spiritual battle we face is the courage to have the vision of a growing church. I believe that if we have a faithful and inspiring vision for our church, then people will respond with generosity to make that vision possible.

The prophet Joel tells us that one gift of the Holy Spirit is that the old will dream dreams and the young will see visions. Let us ask the Spirit to guide our dreams and visions today, that we may share the love of Christ with the people of Ewell. Amen.