



*The Church of England in St Mary's, Sixpenny Handley,
Gussage St Andrew and St Rumbold's, Pentridge.*

St Mary's Sixpenny Handley with Gussage St Andrew Annual Meeting – Vicar's Report 2009

This time last year I laid out a vision for the way ahead – a vision based around making this building more useful and functional. As you know, it is about bringing the font forward, so it is in a much better position, and moving four pews within the church to create a comfortable social space at the back, and putting in an opaque glass screen across the bottom of the tower arch, which will then hold a sound-proof cabin for a toilet. People have been waiting for the toilet for many years here! We shall also rethink the heating and the sound and vision system. And, as I have already said, I believe the building will look fantastic, and even like less has been altered than at present as it will make logical sense of what has been done already.

Last year I was excited by the possibility of this development. This year I am excited because I can report that a great deal of progress has been made in carrying it out. It might not look like it, but a great deal of progress has been made! We now have permission from the Diocese to begin the hidden, but vital, work on the clock and the bells, and on Thursday our Project Managers sent in the next stage of the faculty application for the work at the back of the church. This has been an enormous job – and they have also worked very hard on getting grants towards the cost. There is still a lot of work to do, but we are on the way! And (by Church of England standards) things are moving really quickly. I would like to thank our Project Managers, our 50K co-coordinators, the Social/Fund-raising Committee and everybody who has worked so hard on this project. We couldn't do it without you!

Of course, we are not in the business of adapting and restoring old buildings. We are a church. And the main thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing. And this means that we need to keep looking at our worship and make sure that it is 'fit for purpose.' In our case this means two things – the first that we are growing in depth, walking ever closer to God. Our services are the main vehicle for this, but the Bible Study and Fellowship groups, as well as the Mothers' Union and Men's Group, are all part of this process. And that involves many people. I would like to thank all our service leaders and group organizers for all they do.

And the second thing is in our service to our community, which includes drawing people to Christ by making our worship as attractive as possible. (I am a firm believer in what is sometimes called 'evangelism by fascination' which means that people hear we are doing something good, and come along to see what is going on.) Our Kids' Club and the special services at Christmas, Easter, Harvest and Remembrance are all part of this. But so is our weekly service pattern as well.

To this end we have asked for your views in the questionnaire over the last month or two, and a summary of the results is at the back. Please pick up a copy. Perhaps we could have worded some questions better - in working on this I have realized how difficult it is to ask impartial questions! Thank you for your thoughtful, prayerful replies. The questionnaire asked what we liked. Now the question is about what will help us to grow, and this is not necessarily the same thing.

As a church we are a community that meets at different times and places but with one aim – to worship and serve God and all that means. While most responses were from people who come to the 9.30 services here at St Mary's, there was a general acknowledgement of the importance of the other services, and particularly the importance of attracting other people. As we continue to build our community we need to look upwards to God and outwards to the world around us.



Some of the suggestions made are already happening, such as occasional Healing Services and Taize style worship, although these might be developed further. The main issue that came up is the timing of the morning services at St Mary's. Would we serve our community better if the Traditional and Informal services were the other way round? More families may come if it was earlier as small children are up early, and then there is time for all the other events that happen on Sundays, and older people might find the later service easier. Please think and talk and pray about this, and for other ways we might build God's Kingdom in this place. Thank you.

Many members of the church play important roles serving in our society, outside the church itself. As one of the replies to the questionnaire said, 'Community is the most important thing for the village and the church is at the heart of it.' As your priest, as your PCC and as the church we are continuously looking at how we can serve our community, and how we can communicate what we are about to the community. The Alpha course ran well last autumn, and we shall run it again. I go into the school every week, and they come to us every half term, and we are building up links with the scouts. There is a lot going on. We demonstrate in a practical way God at work in this place. But of course, we can always do more. I don't mean I can do more – I mean we can do more.

Outreach into the community takes many and varied forms, of course. There is a lot of visiting both informal and formal, through our system of Lay Pastoral Assistants (LPAs). Extension of this visiting would require more LPAs, and/or others making a commitment to visiting as part of their Christian service. Perhaps we should be thinking about a leaflet drop on the whole village, and perhaps a wider questionnaire about how we can serve and worship better, as well as thanking the village for their financial support over the years.

We are joining a movement called 'Back to Church Sunday'. This is a national initiative in the autumn which has had success in contacting those who once attended church and persuading them to come back again. It involves all of us, not just those in 'authority,' so watch this space! And on a very different tack, George and Paul and Ted and Mary's maintenance of the churchyard keeps it a place of beauty and calm for both people and wildlife.

And one major change that is coming up is that we shall soon have a new priest among us – well, not new! Paul Skinner has felt God's hand on his shoulder for a very long time and now he is to be ordained deacon in the autumn, and then priested next year. Our congratulations go to Paul – and please pray for him and support him in this development of his walk with God.

But we need to remember that all extra things we do are exactly that – extra things! We are all very busy nowadays and it can often feel like we are running as fast as we can just to stay in the same place! Careful thought has to be given to the resources needed and the ability to follow through to finish what we start. At the same time we need to step out in faith with what we believe to be right. If you feel you have an idea, or a talent, or time or money that might be put to good use, please have a word!

We have so much to be thankful for. It is a remarkable achievement that we have been able to pay our Share in full for the second year running, and still have over £30,000 in the Fabric Account for repairs and improvements. It is also a huge relief that difficulties regarding the amount of our Share are being resolved. But we still don't have enough money for all that we want to do. However, I believe we are on the right track at St Mary's and St Andrew's - although, as one reply to the questionnaire said, 'there is always room for improvement'!



As I have said each year, this is an exciting time for the church in this place. And now it is my duty to talk about something that is both exciting and sad – our churchwardens.

I first met Graham when we came to have a look around the patch about three years ago, and we met and talked. I then met David at the Fathers' Day Weekend, when there were flowers in the church and Rita told him off for talking too loudly during the music, and there were cream teas in the vicarage; Ever since they have worked tirelessly at their duties – and beyond. In fact, of course, they have worked much longer than those three years. When I asked how long they had been wardens they had some difficulty in working it out, eventually deciding that it was 14 and 16 years respectively. This is an amazing achievement.

But things change, and for very different reasons they have both decided it is time to step down and move on. And so I am sure I speak for all of us when I say that we wish them well and give them an enormous thank you for all that they have contributed to the church in this place.

These Annual Meetings are a time for looking forward and looking back, and we have done that this morning. Thank you to everyone who has contributed – thank you to you for coming.

Mel Durrant