

A church that faces the cost of change and growth

This is the third in our series of sermons following on from the away day at Billericay in May. You will recall that one of the exercises on that day was about ranking our church against a set of criteria from the book 'The Healthy Churches Handbook' written by Robert Warren. It was decided that we would have a sermon a month prior to a PCC discussion and that we should take these in the reverse order, namely beginning at those on which we ranked the lowest. We have had two sermons on the theme of having an 'outward looking focus' and no-doubt we will return to consider points raised. Today's is the challenging criteria, being a church that faces the cost of change and growth.

When we gathered at the church in Billericay we were in awe of their facilities. It is a purpose-built church less than fifteen years old with meeting rooms, kitchen facilities, hall and all the other parts of a modern church complex. We were in a church building that was the result of people in Billericay saying that the old church that was in the High Street simply did not meet the needs of a growing town and was unable to be developed. So they had taken the radical step to look into building a new church. No wonder we felt that we were not good at facing the cost of growth and change in comparison.

In the book Robert Warren says that Healthy churches face the cost of change and growth rather than resisting it or running from change. They are prepared to take carefully considered risks whilst unhealthy churches fear failure and dare not act. It is quite clear from these words that there is a danger when we look at ourselves that we confuse the church with the building. Our PCCs have spent years considering issues relating to our buildings. Do we need a new hall? What can we do about car-parking? How can we develop the building we have? How can we honour the past and yet look to the future? These are, of course, important issues. But there is a huge danger that they become our over-riding issue. We could have the most fabulous building in the world. What good would it be if it were empty? There is a line in the Beatles classic Eleanor Rigby, 'Father McKenzie, writing the words of a sermon that no-one will hear, no-one comes near, look at him working'. We must never lose sight of what the

church is here to do. This church exists to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the people of Ingatestone. That was why it was built. That was why it was maintained and developed throughout the centuries. That was why with modernising enthusiasm the Victorians gutted the existing building and produced for us their idea of a medieval church which we have slightly altered today. But we must never forget, the church is the people and worshipping God is the purpose. So let us not just think of change as affecting the building. This is the secondary issue. The primary issue is what happens in the church in worshipping God.

Some of you have been attending this church for a long time, dating back to the time of Canon Hudson and indeed quite early in his very long time here. He is rightly remembered with affection. You are the people who can best say how much this church has changed. Canon Hudson is recorded in the Tower magazine as being opposed to changing the Book of Common Prayer. He also opposed women being in the choir. He wrote eloquently against the removal of the pews in Chelmsford Cathedral and when our own Victorian pews here succumbed to age he supervised the replacement of them with the second hand Victorian pews we have today. Philip Coulton brought in, some ten years after most other churches, the Alternative Service Book and worked with you on the removal of the pews in the lady chapel. I understand both of these actions were controversial. When I arrived we were still using the ASB even though officially under Canon Law we were not allowed to do so. We made big changes quite quickly with our worship. I introduced the use of Common Worship material and a new hymn book so that we could widen our worship repertoire within six months of arriving. These were big changes and I know that some of the older church members who had grown up with the BCP and Hymns Ancient and Modern found this difficult. However, change was embraced and we have worked well adapting our worship. Of course it has been a compromise. Some people have disliked some of the changes in our worship. Other people feel that we have not gone far enough. It would not be healthy if we felt anything else. And the process is on-going. We have recently revised the services and produced our new folders. I think we can give ourselves a small pat on the back. Robert Warren says of a healthy church in this criteria that 'while embracing the past, it dares to take on new ways of doing things'. We are

a church that has tried, and continues to try, to make our worship, our primary purpose, fit with this criteria.

We still have much to do. The debate continues, and rightly so, as to our styles and approach to worship and when we hold it. We have focussed on providing worship suitable for all, with an emphasis on the first Sunday in the month being suitable for children. In a village with an aging profile, this has been a brave decision. Of course young children being in the services are a delight but also bring with them knowledge of their presence. But I know that the vast majority of us feel the occasional disturbance to our contemplation is a price worth paying. But in our building, what can you do? Perhaps we also need to try holding worship at a late time, after young children have gone to bed. You see how the two issues of worship and the building come together.

Robert Warren also says that a healthy church takes risks, admits when things are not working and learns from experience. The views expressed to me nearly six years ago when I was first approached about the possibility of coming here showed that many of you, if not everyone, had reached that view. Congregations were smaller than now and the age profile considerably older. But I am not complacent. Last week I asked, was the church like King Canute holding back the sea and did it have as much chance of success? We have to realise the society we live in. I know it was expressed to me in the past that the church was irrelevant to the majority of the village. Many people get married, if they do, at Stockbrook Manor or other venues. Many funerals are at the Crematorium, increasingly without a minister present. The Elim Church continues to undertake their programme of visiting every dwelling in the village. Increasingly they have the response, “we don’t do church”. We have worked hard, and continue to work hard, to make the church relevant to the wider village community and hope that they will want to come here. However, it is an uphill struggle. I wonder if you have been watching ‘Restoration village’ on BBC 2? There were a number of churches in the series. There were either plans to keep the building as a place of worship and have community activities, or to use a closed building as a community centre. None of these won. A recent jazz concert at the Community Club here in the village had far more people than we

have at our jazz concerts. I guess some people are ambivalent about this building. They would be appalled if we were to close it and convert it into designer flats, as does happen. I guess they would dislike it if it were like the magnificent church in the centre of Bungay, Suffolk, redundant and a shell, not used for regular worship. They want it, but do not want to take any responsibility for it. What can we do about that?

I will preach on this topic again next month, and the PCC can spend two meetings considering the question of how we face the challenge of change and growth. Our new Sunday Club older group, using the choir vestry, is a very positive example of the on-going process of change for growth. Our relationship with the schools is positive. The numbers continuing to come to EMUs shows it is a success. What else do we need to do? Remembering that we, the people, are the church, what do we need to do ourselves to be a people open and ready to meet the cost of change and growth? Remembering the context in which we work, what can we do to meet the challenges? Are we very poor at facing the cost of change and growth? To quote Robert Warren, 'real change is change of the heart'. He quotes Fullan, 'changing formal structures is not the same as changing norms, habits, skills, beliefs'. He also quotes a nun, who said, 'you need to understand that change does not happen on an electrical timescale but an horticultural one'. We live in a world that rates itself by busyness and instant success. The words of Jesus in the reading today remind us of the danger of wanting to be great in the kingdom. Perhaps we need to simply reflect. I hope we are also able to hear the still small voice.

Amen.

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