

Healthy Church series:

A Church that faces the cost of change and growth 2.

It will soon be a year since we undertook our survey of the thoughts and opinions of the congregation over the period of four weeks concerning the Church building here in Ingatestone. We had some strong opinions expressed and the PCC have taken the variety of views and the emotions underpinning them into consideration. Now is the time for us to put these together with factors relating to how we desire the church to flourish and develop in the future in order to work out together some concrete plans. The sermon this morning is the next in our Healthy Church series, following on from our away day to which both the PCC and any other interested members of the congregation were invited. You will recall that we used Robert Warren's Healthy Churches Handbook as our template and voted on how we graded the church in response to nine marks of a healthy church. We then said we would look at these in reverse order, beginning with those on which we graded ourselves weakest. We have had two sermons on being 'an outward focussed church' and this is the second on being 'a church that faces the cost of change and growth'. Last month I looked at liturgical change and the way there has been much change in the style of our worship and that we value diversity and variety. Today we look at the building in which we worship.

As I hope you all know, this building has seen an enormous amount of change over the centuries. From a small Norman Church, of which we have one surviving wall, through a thirteenth century extension doubling the width, to the addition of an enormous tower and a new chancel, the building of a Chapel for the Petre family, the building of an area for an organ and then the extension with a new vestry, choir vestry, kitchen and toilets. Throughout the centuries of ministry here those who have worshipped here and those ordained and placed by the wider church in positions of leadership, have looked at issues relating to the general structure of the building. This and also

issues of the internal layout and furniture. No seats to wooden benches to box pews to benches to replacement second-hand benches to considerations of chairs. Then there have been other issues: building a gallery; removing a gallery; introducing choir pews and an organ. Add to this issues relating to having wall paintings, painting over wall paintings, introducing stained glass windows, the list goes on and on. Never stand in what you consider to be an old church and imagine everything has always been the same. Of course it has not. Needs change, prevailing attitudes change and aspirations change. Church buildings are always in a state of flux and change. And surely this is how it should be.

Hopefully we all know from our own lives that God is forever at work and changing things and revealing new understandings to us. One of the saddest things to hear is someone to say, “I’ve not changed, the church has changed” as if this is a positive statement about them and a negative one about the church. Sue last week talked about theological reflection and how we can understand each experience that we have in the ever growing light of our understanding of faith. That is the authentic experience of faith. For that is growing in faith all day every day. Such a faith is dynamic, forever on the move. The Spirit of God is referred to as the wind. God’s Holy Spirit is forever moving us. So our faith is forever moving, forever deepening, forever changing. This is then reflected in the way we approach action based upon our faith. All action, including giving concerns to the ancient building in which we worship. Yes you knew that I would get back to the building eventually. It is important that we understand the theology we have underpinning any practical considerations.

Just over a week ago a member of the Diocesan Advisory Committee came and met with me on site here to discuss issues relating to the building and fixtures. We need to send the DAC a faculty to make any changes that are of a permanent nature and their permission is needed to undertake any changes. We had a

very useful meeting. The DAC are very sympathetic to changes that are being considered for our building. In fact they are perhaps more radical than almost all of us. His first comment was how out of keeping with the rest of the building was the 1970s extension and would not our best option in the long term be to consider demolishing it and building a new extension. Many of you know that there has been a long term debate here about the hall and I see this as a variation of that debate. It is what is happening at South Weald, but I know people on the PCC there are finding it a very difficult process. He said that if we could not face that, then perhaps we should consider re-ordering the inside of the extension to make a better use of space and improve facilities. I think that I would like us to consider the possibilities of these options, but after we have confidence based in undertaking some other simpler and more pressing actions. After all, this building has been here a very long time and will be here for a very long time.

There are three items that I believe we could and should be all working towards, things that could happen relatively quickly.

1. In our survey a number of people stated that the heating was inadequate in the church. When I spoke to our architect he said that he felt the hot air heaters were aesthetically displeasing. If you ever need an example of why the Church of England has tightened up the planning system, just look at the heater set in the 11th century doorway. We have had a survey undertaken by Chris Dunphy Ecclesiastical Ltd and they have proposed installing thirteen radiators around the walls. This will stabilise the humidity in the building and help in the preservation of the timbers and the woodwork. It will also keep us warm! We will also be able to open up the doorway again.
2. For some time we have been considering the replacement of the choir stalls. The DAC representative agreed that these are of no aesthetic value and that modern, top quality

custom designed and built stalls would enhance the church. They would also give us so much more flexibility. Anyone who has been involved in recent years in removing and replacing them for concerts does not need convincing about their lack of flexibility!

3. The Petre Chapel, even as we have tidied now, is still in very poor condition. We should remove all the old cupboards; have the walls re-plastered and painted and perhaps new lighting installed. Our DAC representative also suggested we repaint the railings in blue or red with gilded spearheads.

He also suggested that we should consider a wooden platform at the level of the first altar step to beyond the choir stalls, to be carpeted. This would even up the floor and elevate the choir and those holding concerts.

These possible developments should be given consideration. There are, of course, other items that could be considered and no-doubt will be in the future. Whatever we decided you can guarantee that others will decide more in the future, maybe some of us in a few years time.

The sermon was called, 'the cost of change and growth'. This is the sting in the tail. For some people there is the emotional cost of the building not looking the same as it always has. This is a real cost, one that has been faced at times of change over the centuries. No doubt some people who always worshipped here in the gallery were appalled when the Victorian modernisers took it down. I know many people opposed the removal of the benches in the Lady Chapel, though now almost everyone who worships here sees this as an improvement. Look how good it was to turn the seats around for the confirmation service. But there will also be a financial cost. The heating scheme has a provisional cost of around £45,000. The Petre Chapel may cost a few thousands. The Choir stalls will be expensive, though I, for one, am willing to publicly say I will buy one in memory of my

mother, whatever the cost. And I am confident others will happily contribute to the cost. We will be looking for grants if we go for this work, but the experience of many churches is that we are going to need to find much of this money ourselves. That is the financial cost. If you were at the confirmation service you heard Bishop Laurie say that all we have comes from God. Indeed the very gift of our life comes from him. If we accept this, then we should be willing to give back. No-one will pretend it will be easy, but, just maybe, we could surprise ourselves.

The full title of this sermon is facing the cost of change AND GROWTH. I believe if we take on these challenges, we will grow. I do not just mean in numbers attending worship. I mean spiritually ourselves. Sometimes buildings are seen as an impediment to the church. This is clearly sometimes true. But sometimes they can also be the vehicles to enable growth to happen. I know of many churches where building developments have happened and those involved have grown in their love of God and in their journey in faith. That is the purpose of the church as a people. It can and should be also the focus of the church as a building.

Amen.

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