

Seven marks of Mission sermon series.

A Church with an outward-looking focus.

As you know, as part of her training for the ministry, Gill Hopkins has led the church to re-consider our mission. Hopefully you had a questionnaire earlier in the year where you were asked about your views on the church and also about your background experience of church. The parents at the Friday morning Under 5s EMUs group had the same questionnaire. Percentage-wise in relation to the number of questionnaires issued into people's hands, more of the EMU parents filled it in than of the church congregation. Last month I shared with you a synopsis of the results, together with a brief outline of the seven marks of a healthy church which was introduced at the PCC Away Day at Billericay, which was also opened up to anyone else from the congregation to attend if they wished. Since then we have had a P.C.C. meeting and the Church Council decided that each month they would spend the first hour of the meeting discussing one of the seven marks of a healthy church. On the Away Day these had been ranked in terms of how well we achieve these marks. Those at the away Day felt we achieved the mark, 'Does a few things and does them well' as our top of the ranking. The bottom was 'Has an outward looking focus'. The P.C.C. took the brave decision to discuss these in the reverse order. They also asked that there be a sermon preached each month before the next P.C.C. to feed their thoughts and to keep you all abreast with the process. Please feel free to talk to any member of your P.C.C. about today's sermon, which will be published on our website. Copies are also available.

These marks of a healthy church come from The Healthy Churches Handbook, Published by Church House Publications and written by Robert Warren. Amongst other achievements, Robert was Team Rector of one of the largest and fastest growing churches in England, St. Thomas, Crooks. He has also worked nationally for the Church of England in roles concerning evangelism. His work is very influential throughout the Church of England and many Diocese and Churches has worked through his material. I met him at a re-union for past students of my theological college, Ridley Hall in Cambridge, about four years ago. We sat next to each other at lunch and he was charming.

So what does it mean for a church to be out-ward focussing and why are we not good at it? Is it significant for our mission that people who we are trying to introduce to the love of God, salvation offered through his son Jesus and his power through the Holy Spirit in their lives, see us in this way? According to Robert a church with an outward-looking focus has:

1. A whole life rather than a 'church-life' concern.
2. Is deeply rooted in the local community, working in partnership with other denominations, faiths, secular groups and networks.
3. Is passionate and prophetic about justice and peace locally and globally.
4. Is helping people to make connections between faith and daily living.
5. Is responding to human need by loving service.

Let us look briefly at these. Robert says that a church that does not act in this manner is 'a ghetto church' that hides from life. I am not suggesting we are like that. I think my view is that we are attempting to work in this way and that we really here, as with

all the marks, must try harder. Robert says that we 'must stop starting with the church. The starting point is the world around and the whole of life'. You see, church is not about an hour a week to escape from the real world. The faith is not about an hour a week. It is about the whole of life and living by Christian values. Worship and other Christian activities are about helping us live our Christian lives in engagement with the real world. In a ghetto people hide away. They are communities that only interact with like minded people, are only interested with their own concerns. I am not saying we are like that, because I do not believe we are. But maybe other people think we are like that. Maybe our concerns about getting this building right for now and future generations gives that view. I think we want to do work precisely because we have an outward looking focus. But I have heard someone say of us, "Do they worship God or that building?"

We should be deeply rooted in the local community. I think the new War Memorial project shows that Allen Matthews and I, on behalf of you all, have been engaged at the heart of the local community. We have school governors and others who volunteer at the Junior School. But there are three schools. I am increasingly trying to be involved in the other schools. But I am not the church. This is not just about me, and Sue and what we should be doing. You are all the church. This is about your involvement in the community as well. If our church is to be seen as outward focussing, we need us all to be involved. Of course many of us are involved in other community groups. But we need to be open about that and also to engage in wider issues and to 'feel the pulse' of a community and respond. An example Robert gives is a church in an ex-mining area that realized their community felt 'frozen anger' of the closure of the pit ten years on. They held a special service on the 10th anniversary of closure. This service also gave some young people the opportunity to say how relieved they were that they were not going to have to spend their lives down a coal mine. Here was a church in touch with local feelings. An enormous number of people at the unveiling ceremony for our new war memorial suggests we are in touch here with something that people feel the village should have had for years, a prominent, public memorial listing the names of the lost. Are there other issues and concerns we could address?

We should be passionate about justice and peace locally and globally. Many people know how involved the local Elim Church is in supporting Christians in other countries. We do a little. Now our harvests are focussed both locally and internationally and the same will be true in future. We have had special events to collect to send money and aid abroad. But it is not woven into the very nature of our church, or is it? I suspect many people support agencies abroad, or support the education of children by sponsoring a child. Perhaps support amongst you as individuals is hidden. Remember, the Church of England guideline is that 10% of our available income should be given for God's work. 5% to our local church and 5% to other charities. If you are doing this, congratulations. Our Diocese has a link with Kenya and Sue recently returned from a visit, very shocked by the everyday conditions she found in comparison to our life experience. Perhaps here we have an opportunity to be seen as a church to be considering the issues of justice and peace on an international front. Once a year we are involved with Christian Aid week, an activity undertaken in partnership with the other village churches. There were more collectors this year. So perhaps we are engaging in this issue in a modest way. At Leyton locally we were involved in the Churches Night Shelter project, working with

the homeless. Before you say that is not a problem here, people felt the same in Leyton 20 years ago. There are homeless projects in Chelmsford and Brentwood. In 5 years three homeless people have knocked on the Rectory door.

The main focus of our worship is about making connections with faith and daily living. The whole experience is intended to strengthen us. The intercessions make a direct link and are very important in expressing our focus and we are blessed with a number of people who lead intercessions in this way. Our educational activities, Lent courses and lectures aim at empowering our everyday lives, as does the discipline of daily Bible reading notes. Our website contains links to lots of material. We have a library of contemporary books. Magazine articles try to make links. So we try. But how many of us take the opportunities? The Bible reading group has a handful of members and only a small number of people take the regular notes. Lots of people took our own notes that we published for Easter to Pentecost this year, but I wonder how many followed them. Perhaps we are not hitting the mark.

Responding to human need with loving service is exactly how the EMUs project began. Vicky Johnson saw the need and we began the group. It is very successful in terms of numbers but organisationally we struggle through lack of volunteers. The volunteers do engage in conversations with the mums and this is developing relationships. Robert's positive example in the book is very like how EMUs operates. We have tried, in partnership with the other village churches, to undertake a regular activity for teenagers. There is a need, but the project may not get off the ground through lack of personnel. This is not a guilt trip. We do undertake a small number of things and do them well and cannot be expected to do everything.

The essence of an outward looking church is that members are involved to 'give rather than get'. To use Christian Aid's aim, they operate with a mentality to the good news of Jesus that expresses 'all should be included in the feast of life'. To quote Robert, 'People in such churches are full of stories of how God has been experienced 'out there' in daily life in the local community'. These are stories about things happening in the local community, not just in church. In such situations people cannot refrain from telling good news, as is said in Acts 4, chapter 20. Such a church is deeply attractive because the focus is not on themselves and their programmes but on God's goodness and the world around. Such a church is living the two great commandments of Jesus, 'love God and love your neighbour as yourself'. Perhaps we are better at this than we think, but we do not talk about it enough, either in here or, more especially, out there. Why? What can we do about it?

Our gospel reading this morning from Mark 4 26-34 reminds us that God's kingdom is growing all the time. From a few people in Galilee there are billions in the church world-wide. We are obligated to reach out to others and not to keep it to ourselves. Though we do not like to think so sometimes, Paul in the passage from 2 Corinthians reminds us we will be held accountable for our actions in this life. In the passage from the extraordinary book written by the prophet Ezekiel God says, 'I make the dry tree flourish'. I am not suggesting we are a dry tree. But maybe some people see us this way. We have a responsibility to do something about that.

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