



**VISION AND PLANS
FOR ST MARY'S 2018/19**

A vision for St Mary's

Exactly a year ago, when we held our Annual Meeting for 2017, I shared a vision for our church with you. I spoke about what is already flourishing, and about the greater flourishing God is calling us towards.

I want to do the same again today. Straight after the service we hold our APCM - the annual church meeting, and we'll share more of the detail of the plans that flow from this overall vision - but for now, I want to paint a picture of the kind of church I believe we already are, and the kind of church we are called to become.

And it has 5 parts. And it goes like this.

I asked God to show me his church in this place; what's already flourishing, and the greater flourishing he is calling us towards, and this is what I see:

First, I see a church community with **Jesus at the centre**. It is the first thing I see because it is the most important, and it is at the centre because everything else flows from it. Wherever I look, I see Jesus. I see him being spoken about from the front. I see people praying to him at the edge. I see small groups meeting together to find out more and to grapple with the big questions about who Jesus is and how he is with us. I see the bible being opened and discussed. I see worship and music is directed towards him. I sense hearts that are open to him and I witness lives being changed by him.

I see people who are asking what they should do with their lives, and discovering new ways of serving God's people and His church. I see people finding new depths of prayer and a greater desire to be in God's presence. I see people healed, restored and made whole - all because they are coming to know Jesus as their Lord and their friend. I see a community built on Jesus, growing closer to Jesus and with Jesus at the centre.

And because Jesus is at the centre, I see a striking quality of welcome and hospitality to everyone who comes. I see a church with a door that is wide open and in which **everyone is welcome**, whatever they

believe or don't believe; whether they're regular church goers or haven't set foot in a building like this since their last School Nativity play 40 years ago.

And it's not just here in this building that people are being made welcome - it's in everything we do. People in this community are noticeably ready to listen to each other, to learn from each other and to spend time with each other.

But that doesn't mean I see a church in which everyone looks the same - quite the opposite. I see a church that has so discovered God's unconditional love for everyone, that we celebrate being together with all our differences of background, faith tradition, wealth, education and experience. I see a community that is always looking out for people who are new and for those on their own, and are being brave enough to engage with them. Everyone is welcome, not just to come into a building, but to be part of the community.

And the faith that I see being lived out goes far beyond an hour on Sunday morning in this building. The faith I see is an **everyday faith**. So I see people praying at work and about their work; I see people who, as they do their finances, pause to ask God for his direction; people who are asking God to show them how to serve on their frontlines. I see people here who know that faith in Jesus Christ has the very best answers to the questions of modern life with all its ups and downs.

And it is clear that this is a community that loves to gather for prayer, teaching, worship and sacrament so that they can live wholeheartedly for Jesus in their everyday lives. The faith I see here has important things to say about how to live well in a world of iPhones and Brexit. This church community knows that God is present in every second of every day. I see an everyday faith being lived out.

And wherever I look, I see **children and teenagers at the heart of everything**, and it's clear that they are at home here. I see them sharing their thoughts with the adults and being taken seriously. I see that there are things for them to do, places for them to grow in faith,

there are ways for them to serve - activities which show they are taken seriously, not as the church of tomorrow, but as the church here today.

And as I listen to people around the local villages as they chat, there's a clear message out there - people say *'if you've got kids or teenagers, you should really find out what's going on in Church - they are the place to be; Cafe Toddlers, Blend, Sunday Club, Parenting courses, Youth Alpha, kids groups, film club, Youth Group, Mental Health support - you really must check them out.'*

So I see is a church that is active, creative, faithful and ready to take risks for the kingdom A church that is both rooted in it's deep traditions and entirely open to God's hope-filled future. And because of that, I see a church that is remarkably **generous with what it has been given**.

The people here give freely of their time, their faith, their love, their prayer and their finances.

And so there are people quietly supporting those who are struggling in the local community.

And because we know that prayer is a great gift to us, there are people who are offering to pray for anyone who wants to bring their joys and struggles before the Lord.

And we are generous with our neighbouring churches as well; we're sharing what we have and what we've learnt with them and we are as keen to see them flourishing as we are to flourish ourselves.

And as people look at this community, I overhear them saying things like *'wow, they must really believe this stuff - why else would they behave like that?'*

And it's not just the practical stuff that I see being shared - I see faith being shared as well. People here talk about God and Jesus and they want to tell their friends and neighbours what they have discovered. They don't pretend to have all the answers - in fact they often feel very

ill equipped to talk about God, but they do it anyway, because, they say
- 'if we don't, who else will?'

And they invite people to come along, and to find out for themselves.
And as a result, others are getting to know Jesus and the blessings that
he offers.

This is what I see when I ask God to show me his vision for us. And as I
look out at you, I see so much of it already happening. I see that God
has been at work here for such a long time, in so many lives, and I see
how much more he has in store for us.

And I asked God to bring this to reality.

May it be so, may it be so.

Amen

Making the vision real I

Whole church priorities for 2018/19

I spoke earlier about our vision for the church. Now I want to talk - as Caroline and Ali have already done - more practically about our priorities, so that our vision might come closer in the next 12 months.

And there are 4 areas for attention.

1. To continue developing our confidence, as a whole church, in sharing our faith with others. This is something we have put effort into this year with the *Talking the Good news* course, the termly *Confident in our hope* sessions, the *Church Day Away* and the *School of Theology* - and we know we need to continue working on this. It's always a bold step to start a conversation with someone about faith, and we will do everything we can to develop a culture in which that is more and more natural, for more and more people. That means prayer and teaching, it means worship and bible study - it also means thinking together about how we might actually talk about our faith. And we will make sure there are lots of opportunities to do that.
2. We know that, as the church community grows it can get harder to maintain friendships and relationships. When we were smaller, we knew everyone and it was easy to welcome a couple of new people on Sunday - now though, we might well look around on a Sunday and find that there are lots of people that we don't recognise. And I know that can be difficult; whether you've been here for many years, or as someone recently joining the church.

So we will continue to look for ways to build strong and generous relationships with each other, in all our similarities and all our differences, including through social events, supporting people to join small groups and by encouraging people to serve as part of a team or ministry in some way - because getting stuck in is the best way to get to know people.

3. Caroline and Ali have spoken about the many connections we already have with the local community - both personal friendships, and as a whole church - and we want to build on those further this year. There are so many people who would love to explore their questions about God and faith - but who don't know where to begin. We will make sure that everyone we have contact with has simple next steps available to them if they want to explore faith.

That means being confident in our faith, it means running Alpha - and we are thinking about doing another really big Alpha next year - and more immediately, during the 9 days between Ascension and Pentecost, 10 to 20 May, we are running a big initiative. We are going to ask everyone in our villages - and we hope you will also ask your friends and colleagues - if we can pray for them, and what they would like us to pray for. Prayer is one of the great gifts of faith, and one of our tasks, as the church in this place, is to pray for the people around us. And so we're going to ask everyone if there is anything we can pray for, and then for 10 days we will pray for those things, and then we'll follow up and ask if anything has changed and if there's anything else we can do.

4. Finally, we are very aware of the blessings we have received. And we want to share them more deliberately with other local churches. We are already starting to do that - for instance by inviting all neighbouring churches to be part of the School of Theology and the Week of Accompanied Prayer, and we are now working on two potentially significant new projects.

The first is a partnership with a local charity called Fegans, which provides counselling to young people and support to parents and families. Our dream is, together with other churches and schools in the area, to set up a Fegans hub for the Weald. There'll be lots more on this to come - and it will mean raising significant sums of money - but you know from the news that there is an epidemic of mental ill health amongst young people today, and I have long believed that we are called to do something about it - and this, I think, is it.

The second project is also focussed on young people and will involve bidding to the national church for funding to plant Blend into other local villages, as a first step in sharing the possibility of faith with Secondary School aged children across the Weald. This is also at an early stage, and there will be lots more information to come.

So there we are - 4 areas that we will particularly be focussing on this year.

- Growing more confident in our faith
- Building our relationships & friendships
- Connecting the community with faith
- Blessing others with the blessings we have received

Over the last couple of years, we have returned frequently to a short passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians. It remains a powerful, God given call to us.

Philippians 1:9-11

So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

May we continue to learn to love much and to love well, so that Jesus Christ might be attractive to all, and that the glory and praise of God might ring out in these villages.

Revd Hugh Nelson

Making the vision real 2

Connect priorities for 2018/19

The vision for Connect is very much more of the same. The various ministries that Connect embraces have now been running between 9 and 18 months, and they are pretty much rooted and ready to grow. If you aren't sure what those ministries are have a look and see what we have been up to in the book of reports.

So to the future. Our overall vision for Connect is to continue to grow a visible presence of church in our communities, touching lives in a positive and practical way. We don't need reminding how beautiful the physical environment we live in is, but we also don't need to look very far to witness many types of human suffering in our midst - be it in bereavement, relationships, employment or health issues.

The very practical nature of Connect is such a great way of reaching out to everyone. For those in our church family who need support it brings a real and deeper meaning to being brothers and sisters in Christ. And for those who we are beginning to engage with who are unchurched it is our opportunity to show church in action and witness to the presence of God in our lives.

So that's all great, but to grow and do more, we need more people to become involved. This isn't just another call for a few more people to join the existing teams, this is an invitation for the whole church to come on board, and join in - so that Connect isn't seen as a 'team' but as the 'Church'. This is an invitation to be even more active, to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our day to day lives.

Because this is something we can all do, it needn't be a tremendous drain on anyone's time either. It could mean cooking a meal every so often, or ironing and labelling a bag of clothes, or helping out at a sale, or popping in to see some of our church family who may be in hospital or unwell at home. And specifically we are looking for one or two people to help develop the Foodbank, which would entail a

Thursday evening and an hour or so on a Friday every couple of weeks or so.

It has been a huge privilege to be involved with Connect - so many people in this church are willing to hold their possessions and time lightly and share with such generosity. But there is a hefty weight of responsibility being at the centre of redistributing food, clothing and other gifts.

It is very easy to be quick to judge other people and the circumstances they find themselves in. A few years ago when I was working in London, I had three really profound experiences, where I found myself alongside a homeless person, and what it feels like to be judged on outside appearances, and how it feels to be ashamed of who we are or what we have become.

Those experiences changed me, and opened my eyes and heart to the difficult situations some people can find themselves in. I believe by offering practical help, alongside prayer and emotional support, we will have the opportunity to show what it means to be unconditionally loved, a child of God, and invite others to experience that too.

Thank you.

Ali Williams

Making the vision real 3

Children, young people & families priorities for 2018/19

There are three main areas where I see God at work, and where we will focus this year:

School/church link

We are already very well connected with the local community and want to build on these links and relationships by offering lots of places where we can meet people and develop friendships, and then - for those that want it - to offer opportunities for people to explore their faith.

Café Toddlers is a vital place where we have the opportunity to build these kinds of friendships and to share our faith with parents, and for the children to feel at home in the church environment.

Our link with the school is already very strong, and this year we will focus on being more invitational to the school, building on the developing pattern of termly parties and film afternoons, and offering an open invitation for kids to try out the Sunday Clubs.

Because we want children and their families to discover the love of Christ, we know that, as a whole community, we need to continue to grow in confidence in sharing our faith.

Everything is connected. Our job is to help people take next steps, each of us has a part to play. The flourishing and growth of this ministry is inevitable!

Growing faith for children and young people

Youth Alpha is happening throughout the summer term and we hope to book the Bishop for a confirmation service in the Autumn. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a growing army of teenagers committed to Christ at St Mary's? From this, we will be able to encourage and support these young people to take on more responsibility and to serve even more actively in the church, in our services, in Sunday clubs, in leadership and maybe even on the PCC???. And this in turn enables the younger children to develop

their faith. Being able to look up to young Christian leaders who are using their gifts and abilities is inspirational.

Blend

The impact that Blend is having on our village community is wonderful. It has brought only good news (apart from the anaphylactic shock). We are in the early stages of this project and the quality of our welcome and hospitality is key. We are showing love and care to over 30 children each week in this building, and this year, we will be more intentional about growing our team of adults in this ministry.

I want to find opportunities to get to know ‘whole families’ from Blend; for us as Christians to make a difference to more than just the children’s lives, and for that light to shine out to the parents as well.

We would like to offer mentoring to some of the young people, to get to know each of them better and to start to have ‘God conversations’ with them and potentially move them from relationship with us to a real faith in Christ.

God is moving so powerfully through our children’s and youth ministry and he’s going really fast. It’s sometimes hard to keep up with Him! It’s incredibly exciting and an immense privilege to be involved with this ministry and to experience God’s outpouring here, and I would love you to join in. If you’d like to find out more, or to get involved, either in practical ways or with your prayers, please don’t hold back. Come and share the surfboard – God’s made one big enough for all of us!

Caroline Turvey