

LIVING FAITH FOR IVER

'I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it.' (Matthew 16:18)

As we seek to further the work of the church in our parish, our starting point must be: this is God's church, not ours. We are here to do His will. There are four questions to address:

Why does God want the church to *exist* in this place?
What are we to *be* as a church?
What are we to *do* as a church?
How are we to do it?

If we can answer these four questions, we'll have a firm foundation upon which to build the church. They offer us: purpose, vision, mission and priorities.

Consider some of the things that the Bible says about the role of the church:

- To be the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13)
- To be the light of the world (Matt 5:14)
- To proclaim the good news of the kingdom (Matt 9:35)
- To heal the sick (Matt 9:35)
- To give rest to the weary (Matt 11:28 - 30)
- To come together in Christ's name (Matt 18:20)
- To love God and to love our neighbour (Matt 22: 37 – 40)
- To proclaim the good news to the whole world (Matt 24:14)
- To care for the poor and needy (Matt 25: 34 – 40)
- To make disciples, baptize them, and teach them faith (Matt 28:18 – 20)

Why does God want the church to exist?

OUR PURPOSE

Clearly, there are many possible reasons why the church should exist. How are we to decide which are the more important, and where we should focus our attention?

Two statements by Jesus seem to summarize what our purpose should be:

You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your mind. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt 22:37 – 40)

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matt 28: 19 – 20)

Put together, these two passages summarize what we are called to do.

Love the Lord with all of heart: worship lies at the centre of our corporate life.
Love your neighbour as yourself: the church exists to minister to people. We reach out in love to minister to spiritual, emotional, relational and physical need.
Go and make disciples: we are called to be an evangelistic people – ambassadors for Christ in the world. We have good news to share!
Baptize new members: this speaks of the importance of membership. We are baptized to membership. It symbolises our belonging to God's family, and brings responsibilities.
Teach new members: we are called to mature and committed faith. This is the process of discipleship. Faith is for life, not just for Sunday mornings!

What are we to *be* as a church? OUR VISION

Ephesians 5:2 'Be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love.'

We are called to be the people of God. If we demonstrate God-like characteristics in our lives, then we will draw others in to our community.

Our vision can be summarised by three statements:

- A worshipping Community
- A welcoming Community
- A witnessing Community

These three concepts of worship, welcome and witness offer us a firm foundation upon which to build every aspect of our church's life.

A worshipping community

'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?'
(1 Cor 3:16)

Worship is central to our corporate life. The church exists in order to worship God.

- the centrality of prayer – as individuals (daily) and as a church (regularly).
- there are many different styles of worship, but one God to whom we direct our worship.
- worship needs to connect with the people of our community.
- Worship draws us to God, and deepens our commitment to Him.

A welcoming community

'do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.' (Hebrews 13:2)

How do we welcome new members and strangers into our community?

- We are God's family in this place, by demonstrating that our love for each other is genuine and sincere.

- By demonstrating tolerance and understanding for each other.
- By being a community of love. *'A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'* (John 13:34)
- By being sensitive to, and aware of, the needs of new members, and those who are seeking after faith.

A witnessing community.

'Go and make disciples' (Matthew 28:18)

For many people, this is the frightening bit. But it needn't be! Much of the time, it is simply that we must seek to do the little things well.

- In church: the importance of offering a genuine welcome (we don't get a second chance to make a first impression);
- By offering appropriate prayer ministry to all members;
- By offering God's love in practical ways to those around us;
- By providing opportunities for 'seekers' to discover the meaning of our faith;
- By providing specific 'faith sharing opportunities' in both worship and church life;
- Through Pastoral Care for the congregation and wider community;

What are we to do as a church?

OUR MISSION

This is well summarised for us by our Mission Statement:

*"Go out and serve the people of Iver in the name of Jesus
by offering Jesus to them,
by sharing his love in word and in deeds,
by encouraging them to walk in his footsteps."*

Our mission encourages us to go out, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to take our faith seriously. We are challenged to communicate God's love through our words and our deeds. We do this:

- through our worship;
- through our regular, church activities;
- through the printed word, as we offer our faith to the parish;
- through practical activities and example, as we live out our faith;
- through specific, evangelistic activities.

How are we to do it? OUR PRIORITIES

Our diocese, under Bishop John's initiative, has set before us some practical initiatives, under the Living Faith program. This offers us five ways in which we can work for the sake of God's kingdom.

- Sustain the Sacred Centre
- Make Disciples
- Make a difference in the world
- Create a vibrant Christian community
- Shape confident, collaborative leadership

Sustain the Sacred Centre

This brings us back to the heart of church life – our worship. There's little point in us developing any other areas unless we have a vibrant, worshipping centre at the heart of all that we do.

What are we seeking to achieve in our worship?

- To embrace all members and ages of God's family
- To draw in new members, in order that they may discover the reality of God in their lives.
- To enable everyone present to meet with our Living God, and offer Him praise and worship.
- To be fed in our faith, and filled with the Holy Spirit, so that we may go out to live the gospel in the world.

How do we do all of this?

We already offer four very different styles of worship, which together seek to offer meaningful worship to the members of our community. It is important that whatever style we may be using, the worship is sincere, well-prepared and delivered, supported by good teaching, and draws the worshippers towards God, and allows the Holy Spirit to speak to us.

In addition to meeting to the spiritual needs of our regular congregation, we need to build in to our programme of worship regular occasions in which we reach out to people who are not yet members. Therefore, we need to be aware that sometimes, our worship must be focussed upon the needs of non-members, and be quite specifically orientated towards evangelism. This has clear implications for what we do in these services. They need to start from a basis of common ground with the target group, and then onwards towards a deeper understanding of faith. One of the privileges, and responsibilities, of being the Church of England, is that non-members will seek us out. Therefore, we need to identify occasions when we reach out beyond our committed members. Examples of such occasions are:

- Baptism: we have a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel with families who approach us for baptism.
- All-age: we share our worship and offer the gospel message in a way that is accessible to all ages, including children.
- Special focus services: occasions such as Christmas, Harvest, Mothering Sunday, when we are likely to draw in people on the edges of the church, as well as occasions when we may actively invite a specific group (e.g. a football service).

Make Disciples

'In Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.' (Romans 12:5)

Discipleship marks the difference between passive and active membership. There are two ways of enjoying football. Either, you stand on the terraces watching other people play (often offering plentiful advice), or else you get on the pitch and play a game yourself. As Christians, we can either be spectators - watching the church from the sidelines, or we can be disciples – actively playing our part in God's purposes.

The challenge we face, as a church, is to transform attendees into members – members who have a sense of ownership of the church's work, and who feel a sense of responsibility for our work.

Rick Warren, in his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, talks about the church as an incubator – a place where new believers are nurtured and grow in their faith.

How do we do this?

- By offering courses which teach the Christian faith (Alpha, Confirmation, etc.)
- By offering a 'new member's course'.
- By encouraging all members to recognise that discipleship is a life-long process, and that we continue to learn.
- By encouraging all members to become active participants, not just spectators.

Make a difference in the world

'You are the salt of the world..... you are the light of the world....' (Matt 5)

As Christians, we must avoid the danger of simply being sucked into 'church activities' and making them an end in themselves. Matthew 5:13 – 16 reminds us that our calling is to be salt and light to the world around us. Every member is part of a human family; we belong to a local neighbourhood; we have personal interests; we work with colleagues. We are Christians in all of these places. The challenge that we each face is to prayerfully consider, 'How can I be salt and light in the world?'

Our church membership should provide us with a safe and secure base from which to go out and be God's people.

Create a vibrant Christian community

St. Paul offers us his teaching about being the Body of Christ in his first letter to the Corinthians. There are also other metaphors which describe the church: a family, an army, the bride of Christ. All of these pictures add to our understanding of who we are called to be. The picture which emerges is one of a unified organisation. As

members of the church, we are called to work together for the common good. This involves:

- Sharing a common vision;
- Recognising where each of us fits into God's purposes;
- Taking responsibility for our individual parts of the work;
- A willingness to grow in faith, and share in the learning opportunities that the church offers, through worship, house groups, teaching sessions etc.
- Being accountable to God and to the church for what we do.

At the heart of the church, there must be love. This is like the cement that keeps a wall together. One of the last instructions that Jesus gave his disciples was:

'A new commandment I give you, that you love one another, as I have loved you. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.'

Shape confident, collaborative leadership

There is a challenge for us to grow closer together, recognise that every member is part of the team, and that each will lead in different circumstances. How do we, as a PCC seek to offer leadership within the church?