

Report of an Open Meeting of members of churches within the proposed East Group of the Locking Deanery on Wednesday 10th November at 7.30p.m. at Churchill Methodist Church Hall, Churchill

Over 100 people attended from the parishes of Banwell, Burrington with Langford, Butcombe, Churchill with Sandford, Congresbury with Puxton and Hewish, Winscombe and Wrington with Redhill. Representatives from the Methodists and URC also attended, at our invitation.

Parishes had been encouraged to invite as many people as possible to the meeting for the purpose of expressing an opinion on the proposed East group of churches. The organising team were encouraged at the number of people attending – current clergy, retired clergy, lay officers and ordinary lay folk.

People attending had very different starting points. Some knew quite a lot about the proposal, some very little. This was possibly what prompted one question – is this happening too quickly? It is an observation then that parishes have not all yet had the chance to consider this very fully. However, the point of this Open Meeting was to kick-start that process.

A clear desire was expressed during the course of the evening that any initiative to move forward should be with the people, and spearheaded by the ‘grass roots’.

Overall the meeting was deemed a success by organisers and from subsequent feedback by participants (although this is unquantifiable).

FORMAT OF THE EVENING

An ice-breaker activity started the evening for the purpose of encouraging people to mingle with neighbouring Parishes. Although some find this sort of activity difficult we felt it served the purpose very well.

Parishes were asked to supply an A4 side outlining the profile of their Parish. These were enlarged and displayed for people to examine at leisure over refreshments. Again, the purpose of this exercise was to inform of what was happening in neighbouring Parishes with whom we may be working and worshipping in the future. As it turned out, insufficient time was found to study these as fully as desired and a request was made to circulate the A4 profiles to each Parish for information. Clergy PCC secretaries and Parish representatives are urged to make use of these in any future consultation exercise.

The meeting divided into 12/13 groups to start the discussions. A very useful hand-out had been prepared by David Colbourne (copy attached) to assist in the discussion process and to provide opportunities for individual comment. It was suggested that groups might like to consider the question, ‘What are your dreams and dreads about this grouping and has anything you have seen or heard this evening struck you in particular?’

Groups discussed for almost an hour before convening for a Plenary session to feed back points raised

PLENARY SESSION

Feed-back of the comments and questions raised, both in the Plenary and on the comments' forms now follows under these headings: opportunities discerned, positive suggestions for the way forward, concerns and questions yet to be answered, general comments.

Opportunities discerned

- ◇ Huge potential for shared pastoral and youth work, and wider ministry and outreach.
- ◇ The sharing of expertise in other fields – financial, musical, etc
- ◇ Working together IS important. It puzzles non-churched why there are so many different ones.
- ◇ We can support, stimulate and challenge one another with our diversity of worship and tradition.
- ◇ Great opportunity for growth by planning mission together.
- ◇ Strong hope for 'grass roots' to push the proposal forward.
- ◇ Strong desire to build on ecumenical links, working together with our ecumenical partners and extending existing links.
- ◇ Can learn from our ecumenical partners (e.g. Methodists) whose ministry and organisation has evolved in a similar way.
- ◇ Greater involvement of the laity (with adequate training – see below) will give rise to new ministries.

Positive suggestions for the way forward

- ◇ Need to appoint a central co-ordinator for the LMG.
- ◇ Organize an extravaganza/week-end away (Butlins, Minehead?) for members of all the churches in the group.
- ◇ Church magazines could be allotted regular space for items from other churches in the LMG.
- ◇ The Group could jointly fund a Youth Chaplain at Churchill school.
- ◇ Encourage occasional Open Air services across the grouping, potentially attracting huge numbers as a witness to the surrounding area.
- ◇ With the potential reduction in clergy stipends pay secretarial/administrative staff to free up clergy time.
- ◇ Each congregation could be encouraged to raise up a local priest/pastor who will have the trust of the people.
- ◇ People in the pews must be listened to fully and ongoing discussions not dominated by clergy or Readers.

Concerns and questions

- ◇ To some, the initial reaction is that the geographical area seems too big (yet they are a natural grouping, clustering around Churchill school).
- ◇ Would church buildings have to close and what would be the time-scale? (it was pointed out that buildings could only be closed by application from the PCC of the Parish concerned).

- ◇ Would people be willing to travel to other churches to worship?
- ◇ Some clergy may find it difficult to adjust – especially those who are used to exclusive control of church affairs and do not sit comfortably with collaborative ministry (3 groups expressed disappointment at not being able to discuss fully because of the domination of clergy).
- ◇ The other side of the coin expressed is that the idea that Vicar does it all needs to change in the mind of both some clergy and parishioners alike. This is no longer an option if the church is to move forward.
- ◇ Many parishioners like to identify with their own vicar. A focal person is deemed crucial. Leadership is therefore crucial to ensure pastoral care is in place to meet the needs of local people. (it was noted that by taking into account NSM's, active retired clergy, Readers, there are already more trained ministers in the area than just those who hold stipendiary offices. Furthermore, with the ecumenical links ministerial provision is not as thin as it might appear).
- ◇ Thought and discussion needs to be given to the training of both lay and ordained – the former, to hone skills and gifts and to equip for ministry and to give authority; the latter, to manage effectively and enable the diverse ministries and adjust to new roles.
- ◇ We must not forget our missionary calling. How do we reach the 'unchurched' and 'de-churched' (Mission Shaped Church) in different ways? Maintaining the status quo as best we can – services in church, for example – are only one part of church life.
- ◇ Some expressed the desire to maintain the distinctiveness of different churches.
- ◇ The above undoubtedly refers in part to what has elsewhere been euphemistically referred to as 'different integrities'. Is there a place for the continuing divisions caused, for instance, by those opposed to women's ministry?
- ◇ Should the Permanent Diaconate be reviewed? Could this lapsed Order be re-discovered for non-sacramental ministry?
- ◇ Should the group be more a mix of urban and rural?
- ◇ Are we looking for joint congregations?
- ◇ Why wait until 2012? Let's get started now!

General comments

- ◇ There is a need to set in place a Vision strategy: to capture it and to sell it!
- ◇ The placing of salaried clergy is not an immediate concern. This needs to be looked at alongside likely provision of other ministers, among other things.
- ◇ Await with interest to hear more about the School of Formation.
- ◇ As neighbours, Blagdon, Shipham and Rowberrow will be kept informed of progress as it is understood that they do not see themselves becoming an integral part of the East group at this stage.

SUMMARY

It is observed that the comments fell broadly into two distinct strands:

The proposal presents an exciting opportunity for the Mission of the church

There is a natural fear of losing the status quo and moving into the unknown.

I feel it important to state that the Plenary session was very, very encouraging. People were able to *start* to express both the exciting possibilities and the fears and concerns held. This process of discussion needs to continue in some way.

By the end of the evening a show of hands confirmed unanimous agreement that the proposed LMG comprising the East group of churches could work, and that it was the right grouping based on the Churchill school catchment area. Furthermore, there was a strong desire expressed to continue to explore the ecumenical possibilities of working together as Christian in this geographical area.