

MISSION AND GROWTH

SUNDAY 10th JULY 2016

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Following up on our sharing of visions for All Saints and the Leading Your Church into Growth conference

Thank you for offering your hopes, dreams and visions for our church. It's been great to have the opportunity to share all this with each other as a church family.

If I had to summarise everything we've heard, and encapsulate it all in one word, then that word would be GROWTH. We need to grow.

This church is not a building, blessed though we are to be the custodians of this wonderful and beautiful resource. This church is all of us here today, all whom we encounter inside and outside of this place, all who live in our community. This church is alive, and biology tells us that all living things grow.

In our context, we're talking about three aspects of growth – numerical, spiritual and servanthood. Numerical growth as more people get involved, spiritual growth as more people become more like Jesus, and servanthood growth as we as a church have more impact in our local community.

Firstly, to dispel a few myths and fears. People are often scared by talk of church growth. There is a misconception that somehow it has to be big, fast and colourful, but this isn't the case, and often this model is actually unsustainable in the long term. Far better is modest, gradual and on-going growth – this type of growth is a wonderful, visionary and difficult enough thing to achieve.

So, why do we need to grow? Because of MISSION. Another scary word for many which actually has a remarkably simple meaning which can be summed up by John, Chapter Three, Verse Sixteen: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life". To paraphrase: God loves the world. God invests himself in the world. God wants to rescue the world. This is not *our* mission, but the 'Missio Dei' – the work of God. Mission is the whole work of God, in **which we, the church, join in.**

The five marks of Mission, adopted by the General Synod of the Church of England in 1996, are:

1. To proclaim the good news of the kingdom
2. To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

This puts evangelism and church growth alongside social care, peace and justice, and environmental protection, not in opposition to them.

So, how do we join in with God's mission here in All Saints? Well, we've already heard some of our hopes and dreams for the future, so let's just stop and remind ourselves of some of the areas where God is already at work in our church:

- In our services, our music and liturgy, in the broad range of styles of service we offer, including Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals
- In our brilliant Children's and Families Work
- Through the Mustard Seed Café
- In our weekday offices
- In our weekday events such as the Lunchtime Concert series or Wednesday Social Club
- In the Mustard Club Community Meal
- In our evening courses such as the Pilgrim Course
- In our Community Action groups and meetings, interfaith gatherings, support for refugees – our ethos of Acting Together in Loving Kindness
- In our Annual Christmas Fayre, our Christmas Tree Festival...

The list goes on and on and we've barely skimmed the surface.

There is so much to rejoice in here – so much we are already doing to aid God's mission in this place. In order to see growth, we simply need to turn up the thermostat.

Growth is imperative for the church because it is our great commission – to proclaim God’s love and go and make disciples. Put simply - people are loved – people are lost – people need to respond.

In our gospel reading today, we heard how a Samaritan, travelling along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, came upon a man who had been beaten, robbed and left for dead by a band of robbers. The Samaritan responded to the situation by bandaging his wounds; pouring precious oil and wine on them; putting the man upon his own animal, travelling with him to an inn, taking care of him and then paying for his ongoing care.

Why? Because that one man mattered in the eyes of God. And this is why when we’re talking about church growth, numbers DO matter. Numbers matter because every new person who we encounter on our streets, every new person who comes through our doors, every new person who joins our church – each of them is a ONE. And every ONE matters.

As we’ve heard, God is doing amazing things in our church and community, but Mission and Growth need to become our intentional mindset. We need to journey from being less of a maintenance church – i.e. one which is concerned primarily with paying the bills, preserving the building, protecting the past, pleasing the insider, prioritising the present and pretending that church decline isn’t happening – to more of a Mission church – where our priorities are praying for growth, prioritising the outsider, promoting the faith, preparing our people to welcome, putting money into evangelism, prioritising fresh ways of doing things, and publicising everything well.

Last month, some of us on the leadership team were lucky enough to be able to attend a conference entitled ‘Leading your church into growth’. It was attended largely by church staff teams in the Oxford Diocese and delivered by a team of national clergy and church leaders who are just like our leaders here, incumbents of churches, cathedral clergy, church planters and so on, and all of whom have consciously enabled and witnessed growth in their churches and communities. It was an intense and challenging but hugely inspiring and energising week. There was no magic formula, just a simple message: keep doing what you are doing already but turn up the volume and make it the mindset of your church.

We're very keen, therefore, to share all this with the rest of you, and will be running a local version of the Leading Your Church into Growth course, for our whole church, starting this Autumn. There will be some meetings for the PCC and key leaders, and some for the whole congregation, so that we can all really own this work and go about it together.

This will be a course where our church will:

- **Learn** key biblical teachings on growth
- **Discuss**, ask questions and apply these teachings to our own situation
- **Become** inspired and motivated
- **Make** decisions, implement plans and discover new ways of working
- **Stick** with these plans, reviewing and adapting them as we go along

Details will follow over the coming weeks and I really hope that it will be something that you will all choose to engage with, because in doing so you will be playing your part in God's mission in this place - your church.

A few weeks ago, we asked you about your hopes and dreams for the church here at All Saints', and today we've heard the things which are on our hearts. This next stage is all about how we enable these hopes and dreams to happen.

We're going to take a few moments now to pray in silence and listen to what God is saying to us. In the silence, you might like to pray about the hopes and dreams God has already placed on our hearts and to ask what gifts and skills you can offer to enable these to happen.

(silent prayer)

We conclude with a prayer for Church growth:

God of Mission
Who alone brings growth to your Church,
Send your Holy Spirit to give
Vision to our planning,
Wisdom to our actions,
And power to our witness.
Help our church to grow in numbers,
In spiritual commitment to you,

And in service to our local community,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.