

Developing a Vision for Growth

By Catherine Ellerby, freelance writer, in conversation with the Revd Roy Woodhams, Rector of St Nicholas Church, Cranleigh (Guildford diocese) and Georgie Hendy, Youth and Families Worker

Summary

This case study shows how a large parish church in the middle of a thriving Surrey community in Guildford diocese, is developing its vision to become a community growing in faith, hope and love, with an increasing emphasis on youth and families.

Introduction

St Nicolas Cranleigh is the parish church of “the largest village in England” with a population of around 11,500. Rector, the Revd Roy Woodhams, admits that a number of other villages make the same claim and that in reality Cranleigh is more like a market town and counts itself unique in Guildford diocese.

“The diocese is divided by the M25,” says Roy, “North towards Woking, it’s totally urban sprawl; South of the M25, bordering on to Sussex and Hampshire, it’s quite rural but with some urban population, that’s where we are. In terms of our social profile, many local people work close to home, although some commute to Guildford or Crawley. Many are employed at Heathrow or Gatwick airports and generally there is a low level of unemployment.”

Roy heads up a large team including the Youth and Families worker, a non-stipendiary priest, three licenced lay ministers, two retired clergy, one person on a preaching course, a part time parish administrator, a Director of Music and a Verger.

An early audit of church activities

Roy was appointed as Rector in autumn 2013. His predecessor had retired after 23 years in post and Roy knew that he would be a hard act to follow, describing his predecessor as having “a very charismatic personality” and loved in the church and the community.

“St Nicolas is a big church”, says Roy, “and it was considered to be successful - in many respects, that was true. There were and still are lots of things that the church does well, but I realised that it was time to look at some of the areas which we could do better... [and] address some of the issues which had not been tackled for some years.”

Roy’s first priority was to assess where the church was in order to plan ahead. He carried out his own audit during his first four months in post and presented this to the PCC in February 2014. His report focused on what the church did well, and went on to look at what they needed to think about under each area of church life.

Roy recognised openly that the report “was based on personal opinion, contentious in places” and was also open to challenge. He told the PCC that, if they endorsed the report, he planned to develop it into a Vision document for presentation at the APCM and wider consultation in the parish.

Of all the areas covered in the report, Finance and Young People – the subjects of this case study - stood out as two of the top priorities.

Today, the church’s Vision 2015 – 2019 has since taken shape around some of those early thoughts and many initiatives are beginning to bear fruit.

Addressing the financial challenge

When Roy arrived, there was a big hole financially and so, in order to resource other initiatives ahead, this was a priority:

“People hadn’t been asked to increase their giving for years so giving was well below what it could be. A number of things have helped encourage people to give including a conscious decision to include the parish mission statement in all communications, on-going attention to the planned giving target, encouraging all forms of tax efficient giving and encouragement to church members to include a bequest to church when making wills.”

“We are working through an on-going Time and Talents programme, “My Church, My Time” based on the 1 Corinthians 12 model. Where one is weak in one area, the others will be too.”

Alongside teaching from Roy, church members have been invited to complete a questionnaire to help them consider where they might offer time and talents. He says:

“It’s really important because giving of money and giving of time go hand in hand in resourcing church life. Giving money can sometimes be an excuse for not giving time, or vice versa, so we’re teaching on both aspects, first addressing the financial issue and then moving on to talents.”

In the coming year, the vision is to develop clear role descriptions for those involved in parish life so that everyone knows who is responsible for what.

Facing up to the challenge of an ageing church

The other aspect of church life which was clear to Roy when he arrived was the “statistical time bomb” which existed in respect of the church’s age profile. St Nicholas had been a lively but ageing congregation which had seen relatively little growth in families and children over the previous 15 years. His predecessor had taken some steps to address this but it now needed to be a top priority. Roy says:

“I upset quite a few people at the beginning trying to help people understand why change was needed, and highlighting the problem we have re our age profile. In one meeting, I challenged the congregation directly, suggesting that large swathes of them wouldn’t be around in 20 years time; that offended some I’m afraid but I needed to make the point that if we didn’t bring in younger people, numbers would decline.”

Addressing the challenge of young people and families

Work to bring young people and families in had begun under the previous Rector and curate who had appointed a full-time Youth and Families Worker, Georgie Hendy.

“This was a brave appointment,” says Roy. “Two years before I came, things had already begun to turn around. As we looked at developing the vision with an emphasis on young people and families we wanted to build on what had been started, firstly to look at and make the most of this vital role...Georgie was working on her own a lot and not many people really knew what she did during the week. Now we are working together which is much better for everyone and more effective in terms of the ministry. Youth and families are a priority for the church.”

Georgie grew up at St Nicolas Church and went right up through the Sunday school before being employed in the role. *“I remember when the Sunday School used to be much bigger” she says, “and there were up to 80 children each week – things were a bit different then as some of these would be dropped off by families and picked up afterwards. From about the year 2000 the number started to decline. When I took up the role, the Sunday school was down to two kids, three teenagers with no older youth group and a toddler group.”*

Working with Georgie, Roy has introduced a number of changes to the pattern of services and to specifically youth-focused ministries and activities.

Adapting the service pattern

On the second and fourth Sundays, the 10am service is a modern/traditional parish Holy Communion with a Sunday school - the children leaving to go out to their classes. The group, Kids of Faith, which is like a discipleship group, is small (normally about 6-10) and made up of children from a small group of very committed families – Roy would love this number to grow. Around 120–125 adults attend this service.

On the first and third Sundays, there is a Family Service which attracts fewer adults (90 – 100) but has seen a significant increase in younger people with up to 40 children attending. Thought is now being given to changing the name from Family Service to something which would sound more inclusive as it is aimed at welcoming and engaging people of all ages.

An evening parish Communion is held on the weeks when there has been a morning Family Service. This congregation is around 40–50 people. On the other weeks, Evensong attracts a slightly smaller group of 20-25.

“On the 5th Sunday,” says Roy, “we have introduced a Praise Service in the evening and are trying to make this a deanery thing, encouraging others in Cranleigh Deanery to come – rather like the minster model. The service is focused on teenagers – we decided that unless we change to a style which will appeal to them, they just won’t come.”

Another initiative which has worked really well and proved popular with local families is a monthly Messy Church¹. The service runs at 4pm on Sunday and has brought together a

¹ www.messychurch.org.uk/

new congregation of between 60–90 people, mostly newcomers along with others from the 10am service.

Roy says that it has been important to recognise that, although everyone is welcome to the Messy Church service, not everyone will choose that style or format of worship. *“It’s not for everyone,”* he says *“one of our most committed families wouldn’t ever go to Messy Church. But for others it’s great and opens up church for people who might not otherwise come to one of the more traditional services.”*

The service follows the pattern of the Eucharist beginning with a welcome, then a time of exploring the passage through arts and crafts or similar activity. There is then a short service of worship followed by a meal.

Apart from representing numerical growth, Messy Church is witnessing spiritual growth in faith and discipleship. Georgie says: *“We have just had our first Messy Church baptism which is really exciting. We offered the family the option of going to the church for the baptism or having it in our hall and they chose to have it in the hall with a paddling pool.”*

A team of around ten people currently run Messy Church including Georgie herself and her mum, Alison who is the diocesan children’s advisor for Guildford diocese. With people becoming increasingly committed to the service and spiritual growth evident, they would like to draw new leaders into the team.

Changing the culture in church

St Nicolas’ vision document states a desire to see younger people involved in every part of church life and to *“Seek to overcome a culture of ‘us and them’ between young and elderly”*. Change is happening in this respect for the good of the whole church community.

“We encourage the children to be involved in the services” says Georgie, *“so that on the weeks where we have Kids of Faith, the children come back into the service and feedback to the adult congregation what they have learned. We’ve found this is really successful and older people enjoy hearing about what the children have done.*

“Children can take on a number of things on family service weeks, e.g. do actions to songs, help with the projector, say prayers or do a reading or our ‘psalm slot’”. It doesn’t matter how old or young they are, if they would like to do it, we’ve even had a four-year old who wanted to read.”

Georgie is running a programme of discipleship groups for younger people, including Ignite, a new group for 10–13 year olds held on Wednesday after school which has so far attracted 9 people and ACTS, a group for 14-18 year olds, which attracts 7-8 people.

“With our teenagers,” she says, *“it is important to make the Gospel relevant for them and that they have time to explore it at their own pace. With our 10-13’s groups they are half church kids and half not, so they are all starting from a different place in their faith but that’s half the fun! We like to do Bible study with them, explaining and exploring but also tackling the issues of being a Christian teenager in this day and age. I don’t think a lot of people realise the amount of stuff teenagers in our churches have to put up with on a daily basis for their faith, to stand up and say you are a Christian is hard. We have a responsibility to our young people to equip them for this, to walk with them, support them and help them to understand their personal relationship with*

God. That is what our groups are about... obviously cake and biscuits are a vital part of this journey.”

At the lower end of the age range, Georgie oversees the St Nicolas’ toddler group which is now thriving and welcoming children and carers from the local community.

Arriving at this point, however, involved some fairly radical changes; one of the first things Georgie did when she took up her role was to close the toddler group which she says was running but not really working: *“It wasn’t really ‘owned’ by the church – it had started as a church group but over a number of years, it had been passed from loyal church members to friends, and then passed on again until the church link was much weaker.”*

Although it seemed strange to close something so soon after she started, Georgie feels it was necessary and easier for her to do as she had been part of the church for a long time.

Getting it up and running again took some effort but numbers have risen from a low of 7-8 families, to around 35 children each week. Previously run by one or two people, now Georgie has built up a team *“Finding volunteers initially was quite hard but we persevered,”* she says *“It’s all about relationship building and there was some “arm-twisting” involved – apart from three loyal helpers, it was a case of “who can we ask?” We went to the Mothers Union, approached mums whose children had started school and anyone else we could think of.”*

Last year saw the introduction of a Bible story slot and one of the team was delighted recently to overhear a little boy ask his mum: *“when it is time for the Bible story?”*

Working with local schools

A large part of Georgie’s work is now focused outwards, going into local schools. She and the rest of the ecumenical Open the Book² team visit the parish’s three schools (C of E, RC and Community schools) weekly.

“I spend a lot of time in schools,” George explains. *“People couldn’t understand why my post had to be full time but now they understand that it’s a big and vital part of my role. Being an ecumenical team is fantastic and a great help in the schools as there is no preference shown to any one church. Each week we act out Bible stories in the assemblies. Any church could do it...and I’d encourage them to look into it.”*

Church Holiday Club

The church’s Holiday Club ran for the second time in 2015 and around 60 children attended.

A third of those who came were from the church; a third from the school and about the remaining third, Georgie says: *“I have absolutely no idea where they came from! It was an incredible experience and volunteer based – people can be slow to get on board but it’s significant that some have become involved having been challenged by the Time and Talents programme.”*

² www.openthebook.net

Engaging with the Community - Looking Outwards

Children and older members of the congregation alike have been involved in a number of events which have brought the two age groups together as well as helping to raise money for charity and engage local people. These have included a joint children's and church choir concert with the local Rotary Club and a Christmas Trees Festival event.

Roy says: *"We're actively looking at a raft of things to bring people into the church. We already hold concerts in the church of all types; as a medieval church it is a great venue and we're looking at how we can make the most of every opportunity to be involved with village events and other activities in keeping with our vision to reach out into the heart of the local community."*

Lessons learned - planning for growth

Asked if he has learned lessons from the experiences of the last two years at St Nicholas church, Roy says that he's realised that *"most of the church congregation don't really know what we're trying to do unless we communicate well – we're trying to do that better for example via the parish magazine or on the PCC Away Day."*

He has also seen some nervousness about change: *"People get very nervous of changing stuff but it's about taking time to answer people's questions and address reservations. It's also about keeping them informed, communicating with them and getting them involved."*

Roy admits that for some of the last two years he has felt on a steep learning curve – in particular he has often had to defend the family services to encourage people to believe that all ages really are welcome.

Conclusion

Roy says: *"Now we have reached this point, the PCC is taking a more strategic direction and taking responsibility for different areas. There is an emphasis on children and young people and increasingly on discipleship and growth."*

By taking an honest look at the church's situation, working with the leadership team and PCC to develop a vision together and by intentionally prioritising youth and families, St Nicolas church, Cranleigh is starting to see growth.

For further information, please go to www.stnicolascranleigh.org.uk/