

**A REPORT TO ALL SAINTS, MAIDENHEAD
ABOUT ITS INTERVIEWS ON
CONGREGATIONAL MISSION AND MINISTRY**

FROM
A READING TEAM IN THE MISSION DEPARTMENT
DIOCESE OF OXFORD

How to Use this Report

This report gives the major findings of a self-study by members of the congregation about the character of worship, education, and general involvement of members, as well as the congregation's responses to community and congregational changes. It is based on 24 interviews, gathered in 2015 by several members of the congregation.

We believe these findings should be taken seriously even though they are based on information from a moderate number of interviews. Leaders should consider their own reflections and use common sense about the issues raised in this report, building on the strengths of All Saints while addressing problem areas as opportunities for further growth as a congregation.

We believe that both the interviewers and those with whom they talked have the best interests of All Saints at heart and gave information they hope will help the congregation.

Our recommendations are meant as areas for you to consider, often in the form of questions, not to tell you at All Saints' what to do. We believe that your congregation's continuing work in mission, particularly with the Partnership for Missional Church, may help it address some of the opportunities discovered in these interviews. We also believe the congregation's leadership has the wisdom and ability to best address its own situation.

All of the people who took time to answer these interview questions, and most certainly the Listening Leaders who did so many splendid interviews, should be commended for their willingness to think seriously about your congregation's members' past and present experiences of worship, learning, change, and mission. Such careful and helpful work will be of dramatic value as we all consider what God is up to in the community and what God is calling All Saints to do here. As we seek to build on strengths, we remember that God equips us for every good work and that we lead by the grace of God's gifts to us.

Question 1: Tell a story about how you sense God's presence and activity in the congregation

24 Interviews 38 responses

Through....

5 – mutually supportive, friendly congregation

4 – Priest /leader focusing and inspiring

4 – Prayer and answered prayer

3 – volunteer activity within and without the congregation

3 – Eucharist

2 – worship services

2 – community help and hearing about Street angels

2 – worship with children involved and Café Church – especially when children are heard and lead

1 each – Christian ethos, teachings, being high church, people coming to faith, visiting housebound, talking with others, full church on Easter Sunday, support at a funeral, sermons, at the peace

3 – personal sense/feelings of peace, being at home.

Recommended questions for you to consider:

1. We have a real sense of a depth of spirituality and mutual care at All Saints from the answers to this question. No one aspect dominates and your relationships, leader, worship, prayer and outward focus all contribute to the sense that God is alive and at work amongst you. How might you both celebrate these gifts and strengths, continue to notice how God is active and share this life more widely in your parish?
2. Some people connected what happens in worship with your outward focus to the community – as when a Street Angel was interviewed in the service. How might the connections you are making between worship and mission be strengthened and deepened?
3. The gift and leadership of children was mentioned by a small number of interviewees but we think this is significant and wonder if you might consider further how you understand the role of children in the church and how they can join in God's mission with you.

Question 2: Describe an experience of profound worship you have had.

24 Interviews 34 responses

At...

4 – funerals

4 – Walsingham – especially though holy water

3 – Eucharist

2 – confirmation – own and other's

2 – midnight communion / Christmas

2 – Easter worship

2 – war memorials / remembrance of war dead

2 – healing (one in Lady Chapel)

2 – elsewhere in other churches

1 each – through support at church, sermon, from another person, Christian Union, Taize, altar serving, sun coming through church windows, holy week stations of the cross, in prayer

2 – no experience or hard to describe

Recommended questions for you to consider:

1. There is a really good balance here around where people have experienced profound worship and they seemed at ease talking about it – it can be in your festival worship, pilgrimage or occasional offices / rites of passage as well as in the building itself and in the weekly Eucharist. Someone commented that the atmosphere on a full Easter Sunday service was “razor sharp” – could you talk together about what you think brought this about and how you might habitually create the conditions for such ‘razor sharp’ experience amongst worshippers?
2. You might also find it useful to explore the relationship between special events (festivals/pilgrimage/rites of passage – some people call these “liminal” times and places but don't worry too much about the name!) and your ‘ordinary’ weekly worship. How does what happens in the extraordinary become available in the ordinary and vice-versa?

Question 3: Tell about the ways people fight in this congregation. Tell about a situation where you and other people were involved in a problem at church and how it was handled.

24 Interviews 40 comments

What People fight about

- 3 – individual differences with clergy (one wasn't sure why one had left but thought it might be due to conflict)
- 2 – music changes
- 2 – worship changes
- 2 – Rock Shop rehearsal (one they were 'barked at')
- 1 each – frustrations, busyness, disputes, sensitivity of people, problem in kitchen, too many 'chiefs' not enough 'indians'.

How people fight

- 6 – don't get involved/walk away/fear of confrontation so avoidance
- 2- vicar mediates
- 2- back biting (one - the "British" way)
- 1 each – subtle disapproval, criticism, tension is positive and can be used, speak to one another, discuss and work through, go to a different service, anonymous complaints, not talking, festering
- 4 - No experience of fighting
- 3- doesn't happen at All Saints

For you to consider:

1. What is interesting to us is that there are many more ways in which you deal with conflict than actual fights about a specific issue that the people interviewed talked about. Why do you think this might be? There is some knowledge in the congregation that 'tension is good' and that talking and discussion helps. Sometimes mediation from the Vicar is required (perhaps think also about whether this is *always* good). What other positive and helpful ways do you have or use to resolve differences? You may like to know that PMC has some resources for spiritual discernment conversations in the congregation as a whole and we'll offer these as we continue the journey.
2. There does seem to be an appreciable amount of avoidance and 'under the surface' back-biting and criticism going on in the congregation. What might need to change in your life together so that you could be a place where people felt able to say what was on their hearts without being apologetic for their opinion or over-bearing with it? How can you bring what is hidden into the light so you can fully see and hear it?
3. Changes in worship and music styles feature most prominently in what cause people concern. Is this the predominant issue amongst you or is there something else that people weren't able to articulate? If it is – can you a) identify what you have done well in introducing the changes that you can go on repeating and b) what you might do differently another time?

Question 4: Tell a memory that gives you anxiety about the future of this congregation. Tell a memory that gives you hope.

24 Interviews 42 responses

Anxiety 21 responses

8 - Declining numbers, dwindling congregation

5 - Failing to attract new and younger members / ageing of the congregation

3 - Impact of changes in wider society and culture

2 - not changing or adapting and lack of time/money

2 - vicar leaving, vicar on sabbatical

1 each of - Same people doing the same jobs; Rock Shop struggling; multi-culturalism and effect on worship; loss of traditional hymns; not enough good welcoming; lack of commitment

Hope 21 responses

8 – presence and involvement of Tiny saints/ children/ young people – ability to attract more young people and some growth recently

2 – vicar – relationality and longevity (hope he stays)

1 each of; CofE on Twitter; people still going to church; society waking up to Christian values; listening and planning; God and all the effort and activity that goes on; growth in diversity; Film club; multi-cultural church; adult children bringing grandchild for baptism; church fete; PMC; installation of new boiler

Recommended questions for you to consider:

1. What stands out here for us is the number of people whose anxiety and hope is based around children and young people. What does this age group represent for you? You are clearly doing some things well with young people – can you identify what God is doing here and how the recent growth has taken place? How could you build on this good beginning? The presence of more and more young people will bring more tension and change - how will you prepare and cope with this? Finally what might you be missing in your giftedness as a congregation if you continue to focus solely on this age group?
2. There is an interesting couple of references to anxiety and hope (what we call a ‘minority report’) around multi-cultural church and society. We noticed only one of your interviewees was non-white. Is this an issue for you that is also ‘under the surface’? If not fine, but if so how can you use the gifts that other cultures bring to enhance and grow your sense of the breadth and diversity of God’s people?
3. The place and role of the vicar is raised here and elsewhere in the interviews. How do you reflect on what constitutes a healthy and life-giving relationship between clergy and laity? Are there places where you can have an open and honest conversation on expectations and accountability?

Question 5: How would you describe this congregation to someone new and tell how they would be nurtured?

24 Interviews 68 responses

Description of the church 45 responses

13 –friendly and welcoming

2 – overly welcoming/ not overtly welcoming

6 – ageing, older people predominate

6 - diverse – age wise and ethnicity

5 – traditional, Eucharistic worship (1 – not easy to access)

2- approachable vicar

2 - loyal – (1 – with a few exceptions)

1 each – small, large, [contradiction here!], orthodox, calm, quiet, not many families, ensures no isolation, more female than male, dislike disruption of children

How people are nurtured 23 responses

5 – through clubs and social events – Tuesday club, men’s group, MU etc.

4 –participate in church activity

3 – given information

3 Alpha courses and other courses

1 each – not sure, respect for individual path, humanistic approach of vicar, small groups, personal involvement from ministry, music and activities, Walsingham

Recommended questions for you to consider:

1. People were really enthusiastic in describing All Saints. They said a lot of things. Do you recognize what they said – that you are (mostly) welcoming and friendly, ageing but diverse in the generations and ethnicity with a traditional approach to (Eucharistic) worship? What are then your gifts and strengths? How might these be used to join in with what God is doing in Maidenhead so that you can indeed welcome new people and grow Christian community?
2. Less people were able to articulate how new people are nurtured, participation seemed to be the main method people thought of. We were interested in the groups/’clubs’ that exist which are where a number of people believed nurture takes place. What happens in these groups? How do they grow the faith of members? What actually happens? Could they be a place where the PMC spiritual practices such as dwelling in the Word are also found?
3. You have some ways of enabling people to think about faith like Alpha and small groups. What is your experience of these groups – where do you reflect on their effectiveness or otherwise – what are you learning from running them regularly as you seem to be?

Question 6: What tells you God is present here in worship?

24 Interviews 46 responses

14 – the feelings associated with and the elements of worship – its traditional form, the eucharist, hymns and music, incense

7 – in the building and everything visual associated with it, pictorial writing, iconography, statues, stained glass windows etc.

6 – 4 - through the enthusiasm and passion of clergy and 2 - how they relate worship to everyday life and life outside the church

4 – through sermons – God talking through preacher

3 – in the empty, quiet building, the lingering of incense

3 – in prayers for others and (1) in answered prayer

2 – personal, individual support from God

1 each – where 2 or 3 are gathered, don't know, Christmas, times of distress, comfort and hope received, giving of time of people, other people's faith.

Recommended questions for you to consider

1. Your building and worship is a multi-sensory experience in every sense. You surely have a great gift here which is much appreciated by a majority of the interviewees. We wonder how aware are you of this and also how much a parishioner who is not a member of your church is aware of this gift – e.g. how open is the church during the week and what are the opportunities for visitors?
2. Clergy and your worship seem to be able to make deep connections between faith and the rest of life for some. How might the ability to 'only connect' be available to more people in the congregation? How could 'talk about God' (or do theology) in relation to the trials and difficulties of everyday day become 'the people's work' - as well as the domain of the clergy?
3. We are curious as to how someone who comes to your worship for the first time is inducted into what is happening such that they wish to return – i.e. how might you become an even more 'sticky' congregation for newcomers?

Question 7: Tell how people participate in the life of this church?

24 Interviews 82 responses

8 – all aspects of running Sunday worship

6 – School links and ‘Open the Book’

6- Men’s Society

5 – Tuesday club

5 – Tiny Saints

4 – Fete & fundraising

4 – MU

4 - nurture courses – Alpha, Emmaus, Pilgrim

3 – cleaning

3 – food share

3 – Rock Shop

3 - PCC

2- pilgrimage

2- film club

2 – choir

2 – admin

2 – Larchfield

2 – Christmas child boxes

2 – Café Church

1 each – special services, parish holiday, driving people to church, hospitality, Christmas dinners, baptism and confirmation groups, street angels

6 – commented on the struggle to get people beyond a core of 20-30% of whole to participate

1 - Participation is to “ensure the organization of church runs smoothly”

Recommended questions for you to consider:

1. It’s clear that a substantial core of people in the congregation are actively involved in maintaining the life of the church and see that as important. You clearly run like a well-oiled machine! The very many opportunities to participate is surely significant and we wondered whether, from time to time you celebrate the amazing amount of energy and effort that people put in.
2. A minority of your activities are focused outward in the community such as the church fete, food share, schools work, film club. What are you learning in these initiatives about forming ‘bridge’ relationships with people of peace and potential partners with whom you might then grow Christian community? Is there anywhere where you receive hospitality from and/or collaborate together *with* others on their terms?
3. A significant number of people worry that the burden of participation falls on the same core people. How could these people be different and act differently to change this situation and encourage the wider participation of more people. Could you extend this Congregational Discovery ‘listening process’ to those who aren’t so involved and find out what might help them get stuck in?

Question 8: If you were to leave this congregation for five years, without any contact, what would you expect to see when you returned? What would you hope to see?

24 Interviews 62 responses

Expect: 25 responses

7 – less people, struggling church

5 – warm welcome back

5 – similar to now – much the same

3 – Eucharistic worship

2 – growth / new faces

1 each – large congregation, youth work cut back, good things happening

Hopes: 37 responses

15 - growth / full church with a multi-age congregation and more young people and families integrated

4 – community involvement has borne fruit in growing the church

4 - several different styles of Sunday service, not just communion

2- modern technology being used

2 – welcome

1 each – Rock shop adapted, music, young people have more say, remain high church, global crises led to renewed interest in Christianity, different denominations involved, display of community work in church, confident vision, shared leadership, PMC established with experimentation.

Recommended questions for you to consider:

1. The overwhelming sense here is people's hopes (and even some expectations) for growing your church younger by involving all generations and working with the community. This is a brilliant aspiration and there is clear evidence for it across the whole congregation. A small minority expect things actually won't change much and will be similar to now. How can you turn these deep hopes of the majority into reality – how will you need to change as a congregation in order to meet these hopes? What might be the very next step you take?
2. There is some difference of opinion about how wedded the future might be to the Eucharist, several think it is the bedrock of who you are, others think there is space for different kinds of worship. How might you go about negotiating these questions and searching for God's preferred future for you?

Final general area of inquiry for suggested by our partner in USA:

We noted the deep longing for younger members and placing it alongside where people experience God in worship - in the music, the lingering incense, in traditional art, stained glass, etc. We wonder if there is a way to find out how young people (or what kinds of young people) find these visual and other sensory experiences powerful and attractional. If All Saints is really keen on young people, can you find out how the young people might be drawn by the sensory experiences on offer in the building?