

Vicar's Bulletin Jan 2010

As we started the morning I described it as being very much a journey. So it was less about making loads of decisions, though we did make some. It was more about getting our heads round the complex yet exciting church that is St Michaels. We endeavoured to better understand ourselves and the context or culture we find ourselves in. Then out of this we thought where might God be wanting to take us.

The meeting was not an isolated one off. In fact preparation for it had started as far back as last June when I ended each PCC with an exercise which examined issues around how big we were, our story, our expectations particularly of the vicar, our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities etc.

Whilst all this preparation led up to that Saturday PCC meeting it is by no means over as all we have set is a direction, the detail and journey are still to complete.

The meeting comes at a distinctive time in the story of St Michaels – things and people have come to an end

- also our finances are in a particular situation that means we are in a position to make some long term decisions. Daily bread was a significant factor in our building decisions and it is in our people ones as well

As we endeavoured to set out some paths for the future of St Michaels we did so very much in the manner of Acts 15:28 – It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, which is why we started with worship.

So what then did we discuss!

We started with a sort of ice breaker which showed two key things about St Michaels. We each had different perspectives on it, which reflects the diversity we have within and across our different congregations. But also there were some interesting similarities in our perceptions. It highlighted that we cannot assume we all understand the past, present and future of St Michaels but listening to each other will help us to better discern where God has lead us and is leading us.

We then examined the thorny issue of money. Whilst this should not be the determining factor in our making of decisions it clearly influences it. The first area we explored was around paid staffing. St Michaels, like many other churches has a great pool of volunteers, without whom many things simply would not happen but we also have paid staff. We currently have a Vicar and a Curate who are paid by the Diocese in the most part. We then have a number of part time staff who cover areas like admin, the buildings and the graveyard. Up until last August we also had a full time Youth Minister but for a variety of reasons that was not continued when Matt left.

So the area we considered was To Pay or Not To Pay? – that is the question!

Firstly why pay any one – Acts 13:2 - While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Thus it is right to provide for some that they may give greater time to the work of God. This is particularly relevant for us today due to a number of changes in society even over the last 10 years.

There has been a significant change in working hours, in length, in pattern etc. There is thus in many people a greater pressure and more tiredness. In many households all the adults are working and with the pension upsets fewer and fewer are able to take early retirement. All these mean less voluntary hours available to the church. Coupling this with more complex community problems and more regulations means that specialist knowledge is required. Also when there are volunteers, they need greater admin, practical, emotional & spiritual support. So there is a greater need for paid staff within and across the church than might have been the case before.

Linked in with this is the question how much. We have to pay a realistic wage – it is not about doing it on the cheap. We believe people are called by God to work for and in the church but they still need an adequate wage. The How much lead in neatly to us looking at our budget for 2010.

Now this could have been depressing as you shall soon see but I reminded them that we do have options and possibilities so not to get downhearted. The short story about our budget is if you remember that I said in November that our giving had gone down for a variety of reasons mainly linked to the economic crunch. People responded wonderfully and we have seen a significant increase in pledges.

However at the same time the work situation has continued to take its toll and more people have lost their job or had to move and this has again had an effect on our giving. Thus if we set our budget in the same fashion as last year we face about a £15,000 loss! We have cut expenditure year on year and there is no slack left. I do not see how we can increase giving in the current situation to match that number. The only item in our budget that can be removed to balance the books is the youth minister. Now please don't panic as what we proposed was looking at some of our other funds so we do not lose this post.

The post started outside the main account and for the foreseeable future it will need to again. This has been made possible by the provision of a couple of legacies towards the end of 2009. They have proved to be real daily bread provided by God through two generous people who remembered St Michaels in their will and it has given us significant possibilities.

The Youth Ministers post started just over 8 years ago and was set up because this was a significant weakness in the life of St Michaels. I am pleased to say that this is no longer the case. What is interesting is that I would now say that our youth work, even in its current smaller form, is one of the strongest areas of our church life and has clearly benefitted from the investment. However this has come at a cost. Not just financial terms but because we are the size we are we have not been able to invest in other ministries in the church's life for example children's work or adult work.

We spent quite a bit of time discussing this and very much felt that we did not want to withdraw our support for this important area of youth ministry but equally could not afford to just put all our eggs in one basket.

So we decided a children's and youth minister would be a better way forward, splitting their time approximately fifty fifty between the two areas.

It is something that a number of churches have done particularly where the church cannot afford two posts. The advantage is that we would be investing in our younger children and building up a base for the next group of youth, which has been a bit hit and miss up until now.

Alongside this we wanted to invest in our adult work. Here there are numerous possibilities from discipling and / or pastoral to looking at different needs of the different life stages for example working with older adults particularly with the opening of the retirement village down the road and the higher percentage of older adults in our community of Boldmere. The finances would not allow for all these opportunities but what they would allow for is a half time post and so we are exploring options and gathering more information to see how this might be made possible.

The shortened version of this is that we have agreed to a plan for at least the next four years for a change in paid staffing from a full time youth minister to a ½ time children's. ½ time youth (these can be combined to make a full time post) and a ½ time adult focused worker. There are still details to be sorted but the finances are there from the legacies to enable this to happen.

Please note this is separate to Kate who is here training and is been funded by some of our different funds and is also separate from Margaret who is our Curate. Curates are placed under different criteria and the decisions we have made should not affect this situation.

So despite our budget situation we have decided to expand our ministerial staff from 1 to 1 ½ and also to spread this more widely across the different opportunities and needs of the congregations. We do this very much feeling led by God and with God's provision. Of course details can make or break a situation but I am excited by the possibilities that this opens up. I ask for your continued prayer for the church council and all at St Michaels as we set out on this path.

Paul