

Proposal from St Aldhelm's DCC to St Francis DCC

Friday, 16 October 2015

Alignment of vision

Last September Andrew was appointed to 'release the energy' and gifting of both congregations. In order to achieve this he intentionally took twelve months to appreciate and learn what happens, why it happens and how it happens, before suggesting any major changes.

In the course of the bridge-building weekend at Barton Camp, communication was identified as vital in each congregation. Then, at separate vision days, each church highlighted key priorities, which were remarkably similar. These were as follows:

- Spiritual growth (via discipleship and prayer)
- Mission
- Pastoral Care (especially families).

This independent alignment of two visions suggests that God is now prompting each congregation to consider much closer integration and sharing of resources. The timing appears to be right.

Complementarity of gifts

When considering the range of spiritual and practical skills offered by each congregation it is clear there is an exciting complementarity. Where one group struggles the other thrives; this is true for almost every area of ministry identified in the recent 'health check'. For example, many congregants at St Aldhelm's comprise young working families who are time poor but skills rich with contemporary technological aptitude enabling use of social media to reach the rising generations. By contrast, at St Francis there is a wealth of practical skills which ensures a well-maintained and orderly worship space; creating a space of serenity and peace appreciated by many.

All gifting is equally valuable and essential in the sight of God - the eye cannot say to the hand "I don't need you!" [1 Cor 12:21]

It is believed that to combine forces is to empower and release passionate disciples to fully realise who God has made them to be. Equally there is a sense of freedom and a lightening of burden when sharing the load. This enables individuals to focus on their strengths and not be spread thinly or try (somewhat depressingly), to improve their weaknesses. In working together more closely a greater spirit of generosity and acceptance of difference would be fostered. St Aldhelm's DCC considers that one aspect of closer alignment and working together would be to share a worship space on one site.

Enhance mission via visible presence

St Aldhelm's understands that St Francis is keen to enhance its strategically placed premises on North Street as a highly visible presence for mission and community engagement. The scope of such a venture is not only to the local residents of Ashton,

Southville and Bedminster but also to the massive influx of people drawn to the vibrant social life of this area. This presents a great opportunity for mission to a wide range of people. It is recognised that there is a desire within both congregations to reach all areas of the Parish.

Variety reflects the wonder of God's design in creation

Society bombards us with choice and individuality yet ironically we also want to fit in, in order to find approval amongst peers. In the same way we express preferences for types of clothes or listen to different music demonstrating our personality. Trying to offer a one-size-fits-all product appeals to no-one and alienates many. The same is true of worship style or 'tradition'.

St Aldhelm's recognises that a key characteristic of the Anglican Church is its breadth of tradition. On occasion a service can more closely resemble a different denomination than its neighbouring church. For example, perhaps owing to its age architecture and tradition, St Francis is occasionally mistaken for a Catholic place of worship. By contrast St Aldhelm more closely reflects Open Evangelical and even then only a loose adherence to standard Common Worship liturgy.

Clear identity achieved through various mid-week and Sunday services

St Aldhelm's believes that diversity and identity is best achieved by offering more than one worship service. This intentionality of focus on specific societal groups, (although by no means excluding anyone), makes worship most accessible to the greatest number; Jew to the Jew and Greek to the Greek [1 Corinthians 9:19-23]. That said, it can be expected that individuals might well experiment by attending various services and float between them until settling into a pattern of preference or remain content to enjoy more than one style.

St Aldhelm's building re-born for social housing

[John 12:24]

Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

Last summer, 2014, Andrew asked Alex Carr, (a resourceful and trustworthy stonemason and expert in church masonry) to quote for the broken boundary wall running along Chessel Street and to assess the general state of the building. Since that time, Alex has concluded that the architecture of the building is so constructed that it makes maintenance of the roof in particular, extremely difficult. Furthermore, the lead lining of the guttering is inadequately shaped such that the slightest blockage caused by a leaf or twig forces rain to seep down into the walls thus causing long-term damage. Additionally the roof and windows will shortly require major repairs. Taken together these factors represent a real imminent and significant financial burden to the St Aldhelm's congregation.

The general aspiration of St Aldhelm's DCC is that should the St Aldhelm's building be re-ordered it would be reborn in the form of social housing and community space.

Key advantages

Certain key advantages have been identified arising from the conviction that God might well be calling for this joining of forces on a single site. These are:

- One church one vicar, meaning Andrew would be able to focus and build stronger relationships every Sunday at one location
- Exciting strengthening of numbers
- More sustainable and environmentally lighter carbon footprint
- Pooling of resources being greater than the sum of the parts
- A mutually beneficial plan
- Better representation to and of the rising generations and children
- Freedom from the financial burden of Chessel Street.

The proposal

It was therefore agreed on Wednesday 14th October 2015 at the meeting of the St Aldhelm's DCC to propose to the DCC of St Francis Church that for a short period, as yet to be defined, that in response to a general alignment of vision and complementarity of gifting, a joint DCC task force be appointed to explore the possibility of sharing the space of the St Francis North Street site indefinitely and to consult with the diocese to re-order the Chessel Street building for social housing. Should this possibility come to fruition, we anticipate a commitment to at least two Sunday services taking place enabling each event confidently to reflect a different and distinctive worship style within the breadth of the Anglican tradition.

Communication

Change is an inevitable constant in our society and face it we must. However, there are always additional emotional and spiritual demands placed on us all as we journey through transition. It would serve us all well to acknowledge this and be gentle with one another as tension and tempers will undoubtedly rise at times. After all, we are promised persecution and spiritual attack when we attempt to do the Lord's work.

Regarding communication, it is recognised that it is vital to keep any message consistent and unified as the task force undergoes its exploration and seeks God's guidance in this matter. To this end it is recommended in order to give the project the best chance of a good outcome and with least pastoral upset, all questions be channelled to the churchwardens of each church and to Andrew. Regular bulletins to the congregations will then be issued and a series of FAQs will be compiled. A series of surgeries are suggested in order that individuals could raise particular concerns, as well as hopes and expectations, with the vicar.

Should this proposal be accepted it is further suggested that a joint statement be read out simultaneously at each church to the congregation on Sunday 25th October.

In the meantime it is urged that the contents of this proposal remain confidential to DCC members only.

St Aldhelms DCC are grateful to St Francis DCC for consideration of this proposal, and trust that together we will best determine God's will for our churches and communities at this stage of our journey.