

How has ministry changed in our parishes in 50 years?

At St Peter's Hall Green we are celebrating our Golden Jubilee this year. In 1964, in a period of much enthusiastic church building, the new St Peter's was finished and consecrated by Bishop Leonard Wilson. This gives me, as a parish priest, cause to reflect on what we mean when we say 'St Peter's Hall Green' - you must replace that title with that of your own church community. Because the building whose Jubilee we celebrate may be remarkable, but it isn't all we mean when we say: 'St Peter's Hall Green'. The truth, I believe, is that St Peter's is a fellowship of people bound together by our faith in Christ and always seeking to become more true to who we are. Let me try to illustrate this by telling a couple of stories.

Recently, a member of St Peter's rang me to tell me of a member of the congregation who was feeling a bit lonely and uncertain about what to do. As we talked we realised that what it meant to belong to one another was already being carried out in action. Another member of the church was visiting that day. Phone calls would be made to other friends and so a little network of support and contacts was springing naturally into action. The caller told me that the person concerned had already said how glad she was to be part of a congregation of people who were so supportive. And so we talked about the ways in which we are like this for one another, and how it is a gradual and constantly changing process of looking out for others. And I reflected myself how we have, from time to time, thought about a more co-ordinated form of care: a visiting group, a list of people to be visited, a network of pastoral support groups. Yet, while visiting groups have served a purpose in putting people in touch with one another, a lot of the 'organised' care has evolved instead into a more organic form of response to need and attention to others with whom we build relationships - just like the example I have described.

This is excellent, but before we rest on our laurels, it is important to remember that we can also stretch ourselves a bit to meet with neighbours and strangers. And so there are those uncomfortable encounters that are part of being Christ for one another. Which brings me on to other parts of the story. For one of the things that we at St Peter's have done remarkably well over recent years has been to sustain groups which reach young and old who are not seen in church Sunday by Sunday. I could mention any of the young people's groups (all very successful in their fields), or the Tots and Co, which is now thriving again - a busy morning of well organised fun and building of relationships every Tuesday. It is thriving because of the dedication and skill of the organisers. Proper procedures are in place. Care is taken to offer the best we can. It is the same with our wonderful Day Centre. For 37 years, week by week, volunteers have, with real skill and care provided a place of meeting and fellowship, and a lovely meal for many grateful members. What is often not realised is that this demands very careful decisions about who can join, about when people are too fragile mentally or physically to be cared for with the resources we have, and about providing not just a 'lunch club' but a series of acts of Christian service and friendship. We do it not just because we enjoy it, but because we are called in Christ to go out to invite people in.

In my Midnight Mass sermon I spoke about the changing demographic of Hall Green over the last 10 and more years. This is particularly significant when we look at the number of people of other faith communities who are increasingly becoming our neighbours in Hall Green. One of the ways we are responding to this is by working together as 'Families Together' - mainly Muslim and Christian families finding things we can share as we meet regularly in church and halls in our special days. This is a challenge, of course, to make friends with those we may not otherwise have talked to. But it is also Gospel stuff. Even

Jesus himself was challenged by strangers to show compassion to the Syro-Phoenician, the Samaritan and the Roman soldier.

All of the above is who we are, and, as parish priest, I am continually challenged to balance what is an extraordinarily fulfilling ministry with other more challenging and changing roles. So, on the one hand, I rejoice in the very tradition that places me here, and I see myself doing what others I have respected have done in all sorts of ages. I am reading about George Herbert, poet and priest from the 17th Century. Even in his very different world I find echoes of a way which is familiar: 'Teach me, my God and King, in all things thee to see, and what I do in any thing to do it as for thee.' And sometimes I am deeply conscious of walking with my own father, a parish priest, both full time and in retirement, for nearly 60 years, and saying, 'Well, he would recognise that as familiar, as the right thing to do, as the way to do it.'

Yet on the other hand, here I am, in 2014, typing this on to a screen on a computer which can connect me instantly to any piece of information I seek, to any part of the world. It can enable me to shape in images or words almost anything I could want to say or see. I spend a lot of my week in front of this screen, much of it responding to needs, giving support, organising worship or pastoral care. In essence a lot of the work I do is no different to what George Herbert or Robin Stephenson did. But in superficial ways my ministry is completely different - almost completely unrecognisable. Having the capacity to instantly contact one or more people, to plan things on line, to send instant copies of minutes and rotas, to write and re-write letters and sermons on screen, all this has changed the way a priest relates to the people whom he or she serves.

We talked at our little study group recently about the challenges of communicating in a world of instant communication. What we are finding is that it isn't as easy as it was, even as recently as five years ago, to encourage young people to come out to Boys' Brigade or Girls' Brigade, for example. We wondered if the instant communication that young people have through the internet and social media is hampering groups like these in their efforts. Time will tell. What I think will never go away though, is the value of face to face meeting, both for those in pastoral ministry like myself and for all of us in our relating to friends and family.

Perhaps the circle will turn back again? In a way I hope so. We will never, of course, do without the internet now. But we will also never really make and build relationships unless we meet face to face. In the balance of old and new which we try to strike day by day we have to remember that. A real conversation is worth a thousand emails.

Martin Stephenson

PS On February 9 we launched our Golden Jubilee with a service at which most of the groups mentioned above were represented. The church was full of adults, children and young people of all ages - more than 250 of us! I feel inspired and encouraged by this!