

sunnysidechurch

An Update on the Story So Far in our Journey to Love, Grow & Serve the Lord

November 2018: Weekend Away at High Leigh

We gathered to build on the amazing work done over generations at Sunnyside and thought about who God was calling us to be now. We focused on Jesus' words about the vine and the branches in John 15. Some key themes emerged which we have influenced our church life in the time since.

1. **Being Together:** We enjoyed spending time worshipping together, learning from one another and having fun across the generations. As a result, we began our regular All Together Services to give us opportunities to do this more often.
2. **Prayer and Worship:** We acknowledged a desire for more space for prayer and worship than is possible in our Sunday morning services so started the *Prayer for Church* meeting and gave our evening services a more spacious feel. One of the blessings of lockdown was the growth in depth (and size) of our prayer meetings. However, the numbers of people engaging with these opportunities for prayer and worship remain small and we may need to re-imagine some of them, so they attract more of our church family.
3. **Pruning for Growth:** We recognized the need to be less busy and that pruning for growth needed to happen both to things that were no longer fruitful and things that were thriving. This was hard to do but, in many ways was achieved by Covid which effectively brought nearly all our activities to a halt. We have tried to make the most of this painful experience as we have thought prayerfully and hard about what should restart, what should be done differently and what should be laid down. Examples of this in practice have been our ministry to carers and infants emerging as the highly successful Messy Babies, and Lunch Club becoming a monthly event (rather than weekly) with a new regular coffee morning to provide opportunities for people to enjoy hospitality and company at Sunnyside.
4. **Discipleship and Mission:** We noted that our buildings, finances and work with children, families and youth were strong areas for Sunnyside and believed that it was not a coincidence that each of these areas of our

church life were served by an action group. The PCC therefore agreed to establish action groups to focus on discipleship and mission so that we could encourage focus and growth in these areas.

5. **Serving our Parish:** We wanted to have a better understanding of our parish and the needs of the people we are called to serve. This has led to a number of initiatives through the Mission Action Group including Prayer for Roads, *The Listening Project* and Carols in George Street. The results of *The Listening Project* have informed some of our sermon series and how we have worded our publicity so that we are reflecting more closely the concerns of our neighbours. These initiatives are a good start, but we continue to seek God's wisdom on how to move towards building meaningful relationships with the people in our parish.

Setting out our vision and priorities: To Love, Grow and Serve

The PCC has met each year to reflect on who we are called to be as a church and how we can serve our community. This has helped us develop our Mission Action Plan which sets out a vision and the priorities we have chosen to enable us to be the light on the hill which we feel called to be.

Our vision as a church is:

To be recognised as a Christ-centred community of living faith which seeks to make Jesus known to others.

Our current priorities are to achieve this are:

1. Worship: growing as worshippers in church and in life
2. Discipleship: growing as followers of Jesus in who we are and what we do
3. Mission: sharing Jesus with people through relationships

Weekend Away at Home 2021: Being God's Family

After months of worshipping together while apart during the pandemic, we gathered together again to reflect on what it means to be part of God's family. Adrian Chatfield led us in thinking about how community is central to God's restoration project for his world and our calling as followers of Jesus. We have been seeking to encourage this sense of belonging by providing more opportunities for us to get to know one another during our services, through small groups, socially and by serving together.

Moving forwards

One of the exercises we did at High Leigh in 2018 and the PCC away day in 2019 was to ask ourselves:

If Sunnyside was a sailing boat

- where is our boat?
- how strongly is the wind of the Spirit blowing through our sails?
- how could we catch a fresh wind?

There was a wide range of views, but the consensus was that

- we were heading out of safe harbour
- that we didn't always see the fruit of the Spirit's work
- that praying and serving together would help us catch a fresh wind.

Although we are now in open waters (though some remain watching from the Quay), we still often miss what the Spirit is doing, and praying together and serving are areas in need of nurturing for us as a church family.

Like most churches, the pandemic has had a big impact on Sunnyside. Some of our church members have dropped away since lockdown (younger families through changed weekend habits, the elderly because of frailty and others because of anxiety about covid or having lost the habit). This has left us feeling a real sense of loss because part of our family is missing. The experience of the past few years, which has been exacerbated by the financial crisis has impacted people differently, but it has caused many of us to turn inwards; to become more fearful and less trusting; to place a lower priority on church and serving others. This has affected our relationships with God and one another. It also means that all the teams at Sunnyside have shrunk, putting more pressure on those who are seeking to ensure the work of the church continues.

Recently I had a clear picture which I believe is from God of Sunnyside as a sailing boat in a storm. The seas have been stormy due to the challenges of the pandemic, cultural shifts, staff changes, and financial realities. However, there were three key facts about the picture:

- the boat is strong and seaworthy
- the crew (which is not just the staff but all of Sunnyside because it is a working boat not a passenger liner) may be tired but have all the gifts we need. No one is being seasick, even if some are longing to return to port
- most important of all Jesus is in the boat with us.

We need to have courage because the storm will end, and God has great things for us because we are his Church and Christ is our head. It is with this encouragement that we enter our Weekend Away 2022 for a time of worship, teaching, fun and refreshing as we spend gather to think about what it means for us to be *One in Christ: United to Each Other*.

Despite the storm we are in, I am genuinely excited about what God has planned for us at the weekend away and in the months to come. I am looking forward to seeing what he will do in us and through us and for us, both as individuals and a church. Let us pray that we will have eyes to see how God is at work, ears to hear what he wants to say to us and hearts that are willing to respond.

**Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid.
The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defence;
he has become my salvation.'**

Isaiah 12.2

Revd Rebecca Fardell
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