

WORTHY OF OUR STEEPLE?

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Buildings tell you a lot about the people who built them. Go to St Pancras station and you can feel the self-confidence and modernizing energy of the Victorians. Go to the House of Commons and it's hard to believe it's not still the centre of a great world empire. And what of this Church? What does this building say? Well for a start it looks like a parish church. Wedding couples often think it is one. That I am sure is deliberate. It was built for Wesleyan Methodists who never forgot that at his death John Wesley was still a member of the Church of England and never wished to leave it. Then look at this pulpit. There are no pillars to interrupt the view. You can tell they were people who believed in preaching. Then look at our wonderful crown and lantern tower. What care and hope went into the design of this Church. They meant it to be special. And they succeeded. Am I being too prejudiced if I say it is Sutton's finest building?

But wonderful as this building is the church is not the building. The church is the people. The building is the building the church uses for worship, education, and service. But is not the Church. This building is a precious and important resource, an asset. But you are the church, and church is what happens here and in the community because of you. The meaning and validity of this building, this church, depends on the service to others offered here, the lives transformed, the spirit that goes out from here and enters the life of the community. The point of a building is what you do with it. So what kind of Church are we?

Well our mission statement tells you what kind of Church we hope to be. Trinity, it says, is an open-minded, ecumenical, inclusive, seeking to serve God through word and witness. That gives us some targets.

Firstly, open-minded. That means we've free to ask questions. Free to challenge what've told. One of the most important religious questions is always does this make sense? Put aside the fact that you heard it in a sermon. Forget the fact that you were taught it in Sunday School. Put aside even the fact that you read it in the Bible. Always the question is, does it make sense? God wants us to forge a faith that is intellectually and spiritually honest, and so to ask the question: Does this make sense?

This is fundamental to the kind of church we are. If you want a church that will give you all the answers – we're not it. If you want a church where there's a party line you have to agree with - we're not it. If you want a place where you are required to agree with everything that is said from the pulpit – we're not it. If you want a church that thinks it has a monopoly on God's truth – we're not it. *But* if you want a place where you are free to think and ask your questions, where you are encouraged to explore your faith a little deeper, drawing upon all the disciplines of learning available to us in order to have a more honest faith, then you have come to the right place.

Secondly inclusive. God makes no distinctions between people and neither must we. One of the most ironic misuses of a name I've ever heard of came in a story told by Bishop Jack Spong. Spong grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina back in the days of racial segregation. Buses, schools, churches all were racially segregated.

*"If you was white, you're alright,
If you was brown, Stick around,
But if you're black, Get back."*

But the Anglican Church ran a hospital named after the Good Samaritan, that man who cared for someone of a different race and religion with its message, the parable whose message is don't ask who your neighbour is just be one. What a marvellous proclamation of the gospel in the face of segregation to name a hospital after the Good Samaritan – except of course the Good Samaritan hospital was itself racially segregated, taking people only of one colour. Distinctions like that are an anathema to the Christian Gospel. The Church is to be as inclusive as God's love which goes out to all.

Today we have something like 20 different nationalities at Trinity. That I like to believe is the gospel lived out before our eyes. In Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, nor slave nor free, nor male nor female, no black no, white for all are one. Let the whole Church say amen! Thirdly ecumenical – we do not believe the truth of God is exclusively revealed to any group of Christians and we are committed to working with all. Or as John Wesley put it – if your heart is as my heart – give me your hand.

Sadly some people haven't got there yet. The other day I was visiting an old people's home, for some reason I was wearing a cassock. This attracted the suspicion of one of the ladies. "Is he a Roman Catholic? I'm not taking communion from him if he's a Roman Catholic". All my attempts to persuade her otherwise failed. Even my assurance that I was the father of 2 children only seemed to make things worse.

To some differences between denominations are of the essence. At Trinity we would rather take our lead from Charles Wesley.

*Names and sects and parties fall
Thou O Christ art all in all.*

This Church is ecumenical. Or there's another you could use to describe this church. The other day I was watching the happy couple on TV, Nick and Dave. I suddenly realized this is a coalition Church! This church is formally a coalition of Methodist and United Reformed. Actually in the pews the coalition is wider, everything from Baptist to Roman Catholic. People from ten different denominations. Here this coalition has gone on so long you can no longer tell one from the other – though whether that has any wider significance it's not for me to say!

But its not enough to work for unity within the Church. As an ecumenical church we treasure our LEP with St Nicholas and Sutton Baptist. And today that's not enough either. Normally we think the word ecumenical mean Christian unity. But strictly in the Greek ecumenical means the whole inhabited earth. So ecumenical mean building unity building bridges with other faiths as well as our own.

Today in this Church it is a great delight to have with us representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Would you please stand so we can greet you. This week we shared your horror at the attacks on the mosques in Lahore. We are so happy to have you with us. Outside this Church there's a quote from Hans Kung. There will be no peace among the nations

without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions." Let the whole Church say Amen.

Fourthly we seek to serve God through word and witness. In a powerful parable Jesus says that the test of faith is how we treat the poor and the excluded. And then he makes it personal; "When you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, members of my family, you did it to me."

Those are profound radical words. They say a lot about the practice of religion. You can't read the paper and not be concerned about the role religion plays in the world. Terrible atrocities are committed by men shouting "God is great." Religious officials hide clergy abuse; deny sacraments to those with whom they disagree. Religious leaders condemn each other, excommunicate each other, invest inordinate amounts of energy and resources fighting one another over who gets in and who is kept out, over whose doctrinal formulas are true and whose are false—over a whole laundry list of issues about which Jesus had absolutely nothing to say.

But he did say this: "When you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

Martin Marty recently highlighted a paragraph from the book *Doing the Truth in Love* that commented on Matthew 25:

*The New Testament has a great deal about the end of the world, but there is not a syllable describing any criteria for the last judgment except Matthew 25. And notice—there is not a word about whether you belonged to the church or were baptized, not a syllable about whether you ever celebrated the Eucharist or prayed, or what creed you preferred or what theology. Indeed, there is nothing specifically religious at all. The only criterion for the last judgment is "Did you give yourself away to those who needed you?" (Context, April 2004, Michael Hines, *Doing the Truth in Love*).*

This is a wonderful building. Today it's been wonderfully restored. But if we are to be worthy of our steeple that can only be measured in terms of the service of others that is inspired here, the lives transformed and the spirit that shall go out from here and enter the life of the community.

"When you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

May it be so.

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