

A LONG WAY IN A SHORT TIME!

It is only twelve months ago to the day that the Elders of three churches met for a day at Holland House to pray and consider our future together. From this point the decisions were made for the Elders to meet jointly in alternate months, to have united worship once a month (this began in September), to create a joint newsletter and to co-ordinate and share social events.

Research was initiated into people (numbers of members, adherents and children with an awareness of the age-profile), finance (combined assets, current income, dependency on hall lettings etc.) and property (current condition, necessary expenditure immediately and over a 10 year period).

In January a United Church Meeting made the decision that we become a single church, which was concurred with by Local Church Meetings in March. The Annual Church Meetings elected three Elders from each congregation to serve, while non-serving Elders in each congregation were encouraged to help maintain the life of each fellowship over the interim period.

January also saw discussions focussed on our mission, as we began to consider how we are 'Called to Love' and how?. These were continued at an Away Day at the end of March and a Saturday evening at the beginning of May.

On 27th April the decision was made to combine Sunday worship in one place, initially using each of the three premises on a monthly basis. This began in June and has led quickly to the amalgamation of various practical elements of church life - rotas for readers and sidespeople, communion elders, musicians, flower donations, refreshments etc. We are also seeking to draw together the different ethos and traditions of each congregation so that, wherever we are worshipping, a sense of belonging will be fostered for all.

Throughout this year there has been much prayer and discussion in a variety of settings, not least within the Cell Groups. These, along with other shared activities, have contributed to building personal relationships and a growing sense of unity between folk from the three fellowships.

The progress made and the ground covered over twelve months can, and does, leave us a little breathless and perhaps confused and unsettled. This is natural and understood and efforts are being made to keep folk 'in the picture' and, more than that, engaged in the prayerful considerations and further decisions that are ahead of us.

Thanks be to God for his guiding inspiration to us over this past year. **Be encouraged!**

THE NEXT TWELVE MONTHS

MISSION

Discussions about a focus for our mission have led us in the direction of the lonely and the elderly. There are clear links with current activities at Hobs Moat (lunch club, Bungalow clubs etc.), with the Generations Project and with some groups who use our premises, which offer a foundation on which to build. Discussions are taking place in the Cell Groups, including consideration of some practical ideas to pursue (creation of places of hospitality, befriending/visiting scheme, activities etc.).

There are also possibilities to involve young people (e.g. uniformed organisations) in this and with cross-generation activities, which would lead to engaging with young people in their own right.

PARTNERSHIPS

Because we cannot fulfil these initiatives on our own, they will involve us in partnerships with other churches who are engaging in similar activities, organisations with appropriate expertise (AgeUK etc.), and some of our hall tenant groups. If we also commit to exploring the Christian perspective on issues raised by such initiatives we will enable many others to engage with Christian faith through them.

FINANCE & PROPERTY

The other key areas for our prayerful attention and action over the coming months are finance and property. We know we cannot afford to maintain three full sets of premises, but we continue to depend financially on hall lettings and so need to carefully consider the way forward. Of course if our level of personal giving was to rise considerably then decisions would be easier, but the reality is: we need lettings income, but we do not wish to be restricted (as we are now) in our own use of premises for the mission activities we are exploring.

Some of our hall tenants have been concerned about the future and so the Elders have sent each a letter stating: *"We do not anticipate any change over the next twelve months to the current ability for your group/ organisation to rent our premises. Also, to ease any anxieties, we would seek to give at least three months notice of any change to this arrangement."*

It is clear that we will need to relinquish at least one set of premises, but this will only be done after conversations with community groups, in particular, to help them explore how their activities might continue.

As our mission plans take shape, so will our decisions relating to premises become clearer and we will begin to implement work to develop premises appropriately. Some initial work will be towards ensuring that premises are 'disability accessible', which will ease the concerns of those who find steps difficult.

WORSHIP

The next logical step for Sunday worship is to settle on a single venue. Our three months 'rotating' the three premises will help us, but mission, finance and property discussions will also be a part of this decision. In the mean-time we hope that coming to worship can be made as easy as possible for all who wish. **Please, if there is any difficulty for you that may be overcome with a little help, let us know.**

Other worship opportunities are developing. There are a number that relate to the Generations Project and take place in care homes and sheltered housing. These are advertised in the magazine and are open to others to join in.

Also, beginning in June, there are two Prayer Initiatives which will be a focus for worship during the week. **Fellowship Prayers** is focussing on our church, members and friends, along with our neighbouring churches and sisters and brothers in Christ. **Praying with the Papers** is seeking to enable informed prayer around world issues.

FELLOWSHIP

You will be aware of opportunities we have to build our relationships with 'new friends' within the church. **On Sundays** refreshments are always served, so do please plan to spend some time putting names to the faces that are gradually becoming familiar.

The Cell Groups are continuing to meet during the summer months, exploring some of our mission themes and sharing thoughts on our plans. Do ask if you would like to join in for some of these more informal sessions.

Social Events are advertised in the Newsletter and Sunday notices. We are trying to ensure that these are regular and offer opportunity for closer relationships to be forged.

YOUR CHURCH

Our coming together has sparked two reactions:

- To be part of a larger fellowship and to worship in a larger congregation each Sunday has given people a renewed hope and energy for what our life and mission might be.
- There is a natural sense of loss around what has been familiar to us over many years, perhaps with a desire that renewed energies and hope might enable some of the past to be maintained.

Between these two there is that sense of unease - not knowing quite what the church will be like when we have completed the process of becoming one. We are building on the valuable traditions of three very different fellowships and so not all that will take shape over the coming months will be new.

However, it will be different! **Please voice your concerns as well as your imaginative ideas**, because it is the responsibility of us all to create our new fellowship as part of God's mission and to create a new community and society around us based on his values of love and forgiveness.

Please hold all this in your prayers, as it is God's 'bright idea' that we are giving shape to.