



**ASHFORD TOWN PARISH
MESSAGE FROM THE TEAM RECTOR
June 2021**

In last month's message, I was saying that being a multi-church parish serving a single place – as is the case here in Ashford – isn't actually all that common in the Church of England. So it's understandable that people sometimes struggle to make sense of it.

I remember a church meeting sometime after Christmas when I was challenged directly with the question: what benefit do we get from being part of the parish – 'we' here being 'our particular local church community'? And I've heard different versions of that question subsequently, in different contexts. I've got plenty to say about it, but I've been conscious that my words haven't always got through to the person who's asked it. Somehow, we seem to be talking at cross purposes.

That may be because we are working with two different models about what it means to be a multi-church parish in mission. And I think which model we have in our heads makes a major difference to how we approach many aspects of church life – including Mission Action Planning, which I'm speaking about to our congregations on Sunday mornings at the moment.

In the first model of a multi-church parish in mission, each church – or, in our context perhaps, each Local Area – aims to provide everything that is needed for those who worship there to engage in the three dimensions of mission: sharing the gospel with others, growing together as disciples, and showing God's love in action. Each church or Local Area aims to be essentially self-sufficient in mission: if it can't do it all, then that feels like a bit of a failure, and if its members get involved in mission elsewhere, then there's a whiff of disloyalty. Some marginal cooperation with churches outside our own Local Area on a small number of initiatives may be OK for those who are keen on that kind of thing, but it's very much an optional extra for the especially zealous.

That's the first model, and of course it's how many churches have worked in the past and still do today. But I have to say that if that's the model of a multi-church parish in mission we carry in our heads and hearts, the benefit for mission of actually being one parish is only ever going to be minimal, while the frustrations at having to work as part of a single parish structure are likely sometimes to be high. The other model I have in mind would go something like this. We all need to be anchored in a worshipping community, where we gather week by week for worship and prayer, word and sacrament, and where we are known and valued. That's really important. But being one parish with many churches serving a single place – Ashford – means our worshipping community doesn't need to be the only context in the parish where we find opportunities to join in with God's mission by sharing the gospel with others, growing together as disciples, and showing God's love in action.

Let me give an imaginary example of what this might look like. Suppose that St Mary's Ashford is my worshipping community, the place where I go Sunday by Sunday, my church home. But imagine that I also meet once a month with five people from other churches in the parish who happen to live on the same estate as me in Finberry, as well as some non-Anglican Christians who live here as well. We pray together for the community around us and plan activities that bring people together and help to build good relationships. They may also give us opportunities to share something about our faith, though that's not the primary purpose. It also happens that I'm really passionate about the environment, and belong to various

secular groups related to that. I've noticed a four-week course on Christians and the environment that is going to be running next month at Kennington church, where they've got a very active environment group, and I'm going to sign up for it to help me be better able to explain the connection I see between climate justice and Christian faith to those who share one with me but not the other.

Now, if we are willing to embrace this second model of what it means to share in mission as a multi-church parish, then the benefit for sharing in God's mission of being part of one parish becomes pretty clear. It's about releasing the many gifts that God has given to the church, to build up the body of Christ for witness in the different places where Christ has put us – including our neighbourhoods and our networks. It's about enabling diversity of initiatives to flourish across the parish within a unity of purpose and shared commitment to mutual support, with each person still remaining grounded in one particular church community. It's about fostering interdependence between our church communities in mission, rather than each one aspiring to independence from the rest – or feeling marooned in unwanted isolation. I find that model of interdependence in mission very attractive, and I'm aware too that there are some elements of it around already. But if we really want to see the benefit for mission that it could help to unlock, then we're going to need to discern and plan together, as one parish, in the coming months, in a way that respects and fosters the distinctive character of each of our local church communities. And I'm not sure we're really used to anything like that – so we're going to need to work at it quite hard and develop new ways of thinking about and behaving towards each other.

We're also going to have to let go of that first model, the individual church or Local Area as self-sufficient in mission. That may be difficult, in part because it's associated for us with memories of flourishing churches we've belonged to in the past, and the regrets we feel about change.

Finally, the second model has far-reaching implications for how we all think about our responsibilities for mission and ministry – all of us, including the clergy. That may be a timely thing to reflect on as we begin the process of finding two new Team Vicars to join our parish. But it also invites each one of us to be open to new possibilities for how Christ may be calling us to share in his work in this place.

The Revd Canon Dr Jeremy Worthen