

Living the Vision: Becoming a Mission-Shaped Church in Havelock North

Introduction

In 2008 we completed a two year exercise during which we focused on our vision for our Parish. The goal was to discern what we wanted to look like in the future. The result was our Parish Vision Statement:

“St Luke’s is a supportive faith community whose Christ-centred vision lights the way for young and old everywhere, by living out the Gospel.”

Since that time we have had several conversations about the potential implications of our Vision Statement for our Mission as a Parish. Last year we held a Parish Mission Day designed to reveal some potential projects that people had an interest in and passion for and were prepared to put some energy into.

While we have been doing all this, others have also been working. At a national level our Church has been focussing on mission and specifically finding new ways of ‘being Church’ that better connect with those who are alienated by some more traditional forms, while as a diocese the past year has seen the formation of a ‘Missional Map’ aimed at broadening our mission statement to ‘Know Jesus and Make Jesus Known’. This mission statement itself came out of a dawning realisation that as a diocese (and wider Church) we faced a choice between embracing ‘deep change’ or facing ‘slow death’. It is clear that the Church is at an important point in its history and one way or another it will be different in years to come.

Vestry has stated that we need to make becoming a ‘mission-shaped Church’ a priority for our Parish. Vestry sees this as a logical and necessary continuation of the work already done. In a real way this is now about how we live into the vision we have for our future. This document is an attempt to (a) explain what that means (b) outline some likely implications of such a direction (c) offer a couple of practical examples of mission in action.

What is a Mission-Shaped Church?

The term ‘Mission-Shaped Church’ comes from a report of the same name prepared by and for the Church of England in 2004 as a response to all the things we have heard so much about for so long: falling attendance numbers, aging congregations, disappearing young people (and their families), etc. It identified that these were all symptoms of a shift in the Western world from ‘Christendom’ (where the Church was at the centre of society) to ‘Post-Christendom’ (where the Church is marginalised or, more often, ignored). None of this was new – similar studies had been happening for three decades.

What was new about ‘The Mission-Shaped Church’ report was that as well as identifying the problems, it offered some attempts at solutions. These involved significant changes at national, diocesan and local levels. The report and its recommendations were unanimously accepted at the Church of England General Synod and sparked what has been undoubtedly the biggest shift in the Church of England since the Elizabethan Settlement.

There are several key principles that undergird a Mission-Shaped Church, and at the forefront is the recognition that as the world in which the Church exists is changing rapidly, so too the Church must adapt to remain accessible and able to engage with the community at large. This does not mean ‘dumbing down’ or ‘selling out’; it means listening carefully to the culture around us and recognising the ways in which some of what we take for granted is meaningless to others, and also listening carefully to our inherited traditions

and ways of being, and discerning where these are, and are not, integral to living out the Gospel.

A second key principle (which is closely related to the first) is the 'both / and' principle. Becoming a Mission-Shaped Church does not mean turning our back on everything we have done and been for 137 years. It will be important for many that some traditional forms and styles are maintained, but it will be equally important that some new forms and styles come into being. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has coined the term 'the mixed economy' to describe this 'both / and' approach. In some places it may be appropriate for everything to be set aside to make way for the new, but not in most. The challenge is to ensure that adequate and appropriate resources are available for both the old and the new.

Those places that have embraced the Mission-Shaped Church concept will generally display three characteristics:

- A strong mission focus
- A willingness to re-imagine church
- A commitment to both existing and new forms of church

There is an important point in this: Becoming a Mission-Shaped Church is about more than just engaging in mission. We can offer social services and care based projects in our local communities, and that will have no impact whatsoever on our life and worship as a Parish, or on the lives of the people served at any deep or spiritual level. But our calling as Christians is to do more than just offer service (although we are certainly called to do that). At the heart of the Mission-Shaped Church concept is the understanding that our ultimate calling is to make disciples (Matthew 28: 19). Doing this demands more than just building relationships (although that is where it starts), it demands building the Church. And building always involves change, often disconcerting change.

In summary, a Mission-Shaped Church:

- Recognises that just as the world is changing, so must the Church, but in ways that maintain our Gospel integrity.
- Is prepared to see (recognise and understand) and be (actively do and live out) Church in new and sometimes highly unconventional ways.
- Encompasses both the existing and the new, and appropriately resources both.
- Understands that accomplishing the above requires a major commitment and focus from all.

Finally, while there are some common characteristics among Mission-Shaped Churches, it is important to remember that they are (and by definition must be) different. A Mission-Shaped Church is responding to its own context, with all of the peculiarities and particularities that implies. What works in one place may not in another – there are no magic formulae!

What are the likely implications of this for us?

In short; focus, energy, resources and comfort. Doing anything new requires these things. Attention that might usually be focused in one direction needs to be centred elsewhere. Along with the energy and time, there is always a financial cost and a demand on human resources. And doing something new means some things change and change is never comfortable.

There are other likely implications as well. As we get more outwards in our focus and more involved in our local community we will also find more opportunities. As we build relationships beyond what we currently have we will find ourselves engaged with people and places we have been absent from before. Hopefully also we will experience new life and energy, both for those directly involved and for the Parish as a whole. Stepping out in new directions can be difficult and uncomfortable and expensive and challenging, but it can also be invigorating.

What will be specifically required will be strong leadership (both lay and ordained, Vestry and staff), financial resources, and plenty of volunteers - nothing much will be able to happen without people and at least some money, and experience has shown that even then it will struggle unless there is good leadership involved.

Of course what specific implications being a Mission-Shaped Church has for us depends ultimately on what we do, although it could be said that the very first implication is we have to do something!

Four Ideas

There are, literally, at least dozens of possible mission ideas we could pursue. Ultimately those that come into being must be those for which people have passion. One person's dream will not be enough to maintain a mission project for long. The hope is that we will, as a Parish, identify opportunities that spark passion and energy in us all. In the meantime, here are some ideas that may at least offer a glimpse of the sort of thing we're talking about.

Messy Church – this is really an extension of what we are currently doing in The New Service on the first Sunday of each month. The goal would be to offer a mid-week, child focused service after school once a month (to start), featuring activities and learning opportunities designed for un-churched children and their families. These are children who have never heard a Bible story, never said the Lord's Prayer, never been to a church service, and possibly never been in a church. The real difference between this and The New Service, however, is that the Messy Church services would happen at the schools or some other neutral venue! This would mean going to rather than inviting to (another key principle for Mission-Shaped Churches) and building our connections with the wider community. There are three main primary schools in the Village, so if Messy Church was offered at each that would be three times per month.

Making this happen would require people – to plan and run the services – and money for the necessary resources.

Street Meals – At the Parish Mission Day last year one of the projects that came to light was based around the idea of arranging regular community meals in the Lucknow area. The goal was simply to form relationships, with no expectations of future involvement or commitment to the Church.

Everything starts with relationships, and in our communities they are a dying art. Where once everybody knew everybody in their street, today you can live and die without even knowing your immediate neighbours. When people know each other they are more likely to watch out for each other, to care about each other, and to help each other when they need it.

The idea of this project is that we choose maybe three streets (to begin with anyway). It will be vital that one of the people involved in organising and running the project lives in the street. Then, once a month to begin with, the whole street is invited to a meal. If the street is too big for the house, then another venue will have to be found – maybe a school or a kindergarten – but the same hospitality is offered as it would be if the meal were happening in a home.

This is, primarily, about building relationships, but it also has the potential to develop into something more, possibly even a house-church, but that would be well down the track. Research shows that mission projects working with unchurched people will usually take at least five years to develop beyond just a relationship forming status.

Again, what would be required here are people and either money or more people to provide the meals.

Brookvale Community Connections – The Brookvale Estate area is the largest housing subdivision in Havelock North, and continues to grow. It currently has no community amenities, including churches. Of course, the rest of Havelock North is only a few minutes away, but there are two issues there that touch not only on Brookvale, but other areas as well.

The first is simply ability. Any parent of young children knows that a seemingly simple trip to the shops or library takes on military proportions when organising toddlers, and is virtually impossible when one or more are sick. Similarly, elderly people can find arranging a trip to the middle of the Village a struggle, especially if they are unable to drive.

The second issue is, in many ways, more significant than the first. The lack of amenities within a neighbourhood means people have to leave that neighbourhood to access them, and in doing so lose an opportunity to actually meet their neighbours. By offering opportunities within the Brookvale area we provide the possibility for community-building (which only takes place in the context of relationship-forming) to happen.

This proposal offers the opportunity to work in stages if desired. The idea is to offer community-focused events and programmes in Brookvale. Obvious possibilities include Pre-School Music, Coffee Mornings, Drop In opportunities, and exercise programmes. Possible longer-term plans might include the establishment of a community house and a local congregation / house-church.

Once again, what this project would require people and funding. It would also require premises.

Community Needs Assessment – A Community Needs Assessment is exactly what it says – an assessment of the needs in and of that community. It is done by way of personal contact and conversation. It literally means knocking on doors and talking to people, and as such it is time consuming and demands human resources. It is something that can be contracted out, but because of the time involved that is expensive.

The outcomes of a Community Needs Assessment are two-fold: Firstly, you discover what the community needs! That can be extremely helpful, and enlightening – what we may perceive might be very different than what people actually want. Secondly, it lets people know that the Church is interested and wants to be involved in the community.

Some would argue that a Community Needs Assessment should happen before anything else, but that assumes that our only focus here is to offer services to the community. There is nothing to say we cannot start to do some things and if we discover there is no demand, we can stop them.

Two other places to think about – we have not for many years really put any focus into Waimarama or Elsthorpe / Kairakau. These are largely the forgotten parts of the Parish and some thought needs to be given as to what might happen in them, or indeed if anything should happen in them.

What they all have in common ... is that none of them are focused on St Luke's. This comes back to the first key principle of a Mission-Shaped Church; the Parish church is no longer a place where the community gathers on a regular basis. The days are long gone when we could 'put on a programme' at the church and wait for people to come to us. If we want to connect with our wider community, if we want to be missional, we need to go to them and be where they are.

That doesn't mean there is no place for St Luke's, or that it just becomes a pretty shrine to Havelock North Anglicanism. St Luke's is key to the entire Mission-Shaped Church concept in Havelock North in two ways:

Firstly, it is from St Luke's that all else will flow. This is the worshipping and working heart of the Parish. It is the mother-church for our district and needs to continue in that role as we move into the future, giving birth to and nurturing new projects and possibly even churches. St Luke's also needs to continue to offer pastoral care and liturgical opportunities to those for whom the established forms and styles are still relevant and helpful. This is the 'both and' principle in action.

Secondly, St Luke's is in a privileged position as a place of community gathering for celebration and mourning. Our Parish hosts more weddings, funerals and baptisms than any other Parish in the diocese, and that needs to be nurtured and respected also. This is, of course, an example of mission already happening. Communities need places in which they can gather to express their shared emotions. In most places that is no longer the local church, but for some at least, St Luke's remains that place in Havelock North, and a key part of our ministry in recent years has been ensuring that those who come to such events have a positive, 21st century Anglican experience. Basically, we do this stuff well, and need to continue to do so!

In Conclusion

Becoming a Mission-Shaped Church demands change and sacrifice, and will therefore never be easy or painless. But this is not about giving something up, it is about taking up the opportunities that present themselves for experiencing new life, new purpose, and actually living the vision we say we have for ourselves.

"Choose life so that you and your descendants may live"

Deuteronomy 30: 19

Havelock North Parish Vestry
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