

St Helen with St Martin PCC

Transcending the parish

mid-year review 2010



This is a working paper and does not necessarily represent PCC policy.

Our identity

Much of what makes us different would normally be regarded as a negative. We have almost no resident population, and currently no Sunday service of our own. We are a small PCC. Almost all regular worshippers are also part of another congregation. We do not have the human resources normally assumed of a parish, and much of the material directed to us from diocese and elsewhere often seems irrelevant. But the advantages of that distinctive identity are becoming increasingly clear. There has always been a place, at least in city centres, for churches that do not exist wholly or mainly to serve a resident parish, and the most successful church in York of the past half century, St Michael le Belfrey, has not functioned as an ordinary parish church. The very fact that we lack a narrow loyalty and represent a diverse range of interests and activities within the wider church gives us a strength and width of vision which is increasingly in tune with prevailing attitudes in the church as a whole.

Congregations, or users?

Most parishes, and clergy, define themselves in relation to their congregations, normally understood as those attending for services more or less regularly and identifying it as their main or only church. Church structures are normally built around the concept. There are people who regularly attend the services at St Martin on Wednesdays or Saturdays, or even both, but they would not for the most part put it first when asked to name their church. Taken across the two churches, day in and day out, the vast majority of people who visit never attend formal worship there. Some come in out of curiosity or to see the architecture, some to get away from the street, some respond powerfully to the sacred space, some come very deliberately to meditate or pray and some very often. We rarely meet them or know their names, and the only tangible evidence of their existence may be the visitor books and prayer board in St Martin.

It raises important questions for us of whom we and the churches exist to serve.

Peace and Reconciliation

When the decision was made in 1951 to retain the remaining aisle and tower of St Martin's as a chapel rather than restore the church as it had been, the inevitable focus was on the memory of the horrors of war. By 1968, when Britain was seeking a new political alliance with Germany within the context of the Common Market, the focus for the newly restored building had shifted to reconciliation with old enemies. Circumstances have meant that our efforts to define the peace and reconciliation purpose for our own time has taken longer than we had hoped, but the objective is clearer. We seek a policy which is:

- founded on a sound theological understanding;
- informed by the work and experience of other places and organisations particularly those with a specific peace and reconciliation remit;

- sensitive to the needs and concerns of the many users of, and visitors to, St Martin from around the world, many of whom may not share our religious experience;
- relevant to our time and place, and reflects local needs.

The PCC's conviction that this process could only be carried through with the participation of all the clergy associated with St Martin, and in particular our new incumbent, was very painful for one person but the delay has given us time for reflection and to continue to inform ourselves more fully.

St Margaret Clitherow

St Martin is the only building with real links to Margaret Clitherow, and it was appropriate that we should take the initiative in offering to celebrate the 40th anniversary this year of her canonisation. The service is to be at St Martin's on 30 August, presided at by the senior Roman Catholic priest in the city. But the emphasis 40 years ago was on the persecution of English Roman Catholics in the late sixteenth century and she has stood in many ways as a symbol of what divides us. We have the opportunity to encourage a new understanding of ways in which her life can stand as a model today, but this needs to be done with sensitivity. The indications are that Roman Catholics at all levels in York are ready for this, but it is not something that we should do without the engagement of clergy in both Churches, and we have made approaches which we hope will bear richer fruit as a consequence of this anniversary service.

Facing outwards

Both churches are in busy locations. St Helen, though facing directly onto the square, suffers from having a less immediately attractive interior and relatively little going on, but it is significant that Cards for Good Causes reported that last year sales in St Helen exceeded those at their much longer established shop in St Martin showing that the potential is there. For the past two years the archbishop has chosen to base his Ash Wednesday observance at St Helen.

We are not currently gaining sufficient advantage from St Helen's location. There have been a couple of exhibitions, in March mounted by the local Amnesty International branch, and for Refugee Week in June one organised by the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York, in both cases taking advantage of displays professionally prepared. But the layout of the church does not lend itself to large exhibitions and the space is far from ideal. Concert bookings have declined this year; there are various reasons for this but the biggest factor is undoubtedly the poor door receipts, which probably reflect a general decline in attendance at classical music concerts for which there are many other venues in York. The Chinese Church aside, the only thing that gets many people through the doors is trading activities which take place there, particularly the charity Christmas card shop in the autumn and the Feed the Minds book sales through this summer. But in its present configuration the church is not ideal even for that.



*St Helen's on Ash Wednesday 2010 during the launch
of the national Say One for Me event*

The situation at St Martin is different, in that it is easier to offer the church as a tourist stop and a place of quiet reflection, though the charity card shop also dominates from early October onward. But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that both buildings work best in the role for which they were designed, as churches, and that even if we wanted to change that costs probably rule it out for the foreseeable future.

As with Say One for Me on Ash Wednesday, which combined worship in church with sending groups onto the street, part of the answer may be to reach out to where people already are, though we lack the resources to do that ourselves. We have been approached informally over the possibility of street prayer groups regularly basing themselves in our burial ground in Davygate, for example. But the buildings remain our greatest asset, and we need to continue to explore the possibilities they offer.

Evenings and the Night-time Economy

By late afternoon most tourist venues are beginning to close though the Minster remains open until 6.30pm. Restaurants and bars dominate, and an atmosphere is created which many people of any age find positively unpleasant. We try to respond to the expressed demand for places for quiet prayer or to visit by keeping the churches open into the evening where we can, but the practicalities of one of us having to go into the city to lock up means that can be difficult. We have asked the city council to take measures to control the street ambiance, in particular by prohibiting the playing of music into the streets and St Martin churchyard, and have supported the proposal of the council to extend the current Cumulative Impact Zone to include most of the parish, making it easier to limit growth in the number of licensed premises. We have encouraged the city council to take into account things other than recorded crime as evidence of the undesirable impact of the activities of licensed premises. It may be that the law may need to be strengthened and the subject has been discussed with the leader of the council.

We also recognise that the licensed trade is an important part of the life of the parish. It has not been easy to establish a relationship with the bars behind St Martin because of changes there and perceived conflicts of interest. But we do offer St Martin as a base for the Street Angels when covering our parish, currently from 10pm until 3am on Friday and Saturday nights, and we will continue to look at ways of engaging with the issues.

Liturgy

We have continued to hold services at St Martin on Wednesdays and Saturdays following the pattern of Common Worship order one, which we believe best reflects our ambition to offer mainstream Anglican worship there within the sacramental tradition. There is no reason why that should be unattractive or unimaginative; permitted variations in liturgy and particularly new initiatives at St Helen's must await discussion with our new incumbent, but we can be proud of our new service booklet with a stunning cover photograph by Ed Godfrey.

Healing

Healing takes its place with peace and reconciliation as part of the Christian message from its very beginnings. At present the eucharist on the first Wednesday of the month includes the laying on of hands and anointing following the Common Worship liturgy. This began as an experiment two years ago and we have retained it since the demand exists. But we have recognised that it needs to be seen in the context of the wider healing ministry in all its forms in the city as well as the peace and reconciliation dedication of St Martin.

York Chinese Church

This began at St Michael le Belfrey under the aegis of a Mandarin speaking couple, and the move of services to St Helen reflected in part some difficulties in the relationship and differing priorities. For the past couple of years they have been operating in an awkward arrangement whereby they have functioned as an independent church under the guidance of the original founders from their home in Reading, but drawing ministerial support from St Michael's and Leeds Chinese Christian Church. It has been difficult for us to engage as we might not least because services are conducted in Mandarin.

They are now entering a new phase as the founders are moving to China, and active leadership will be offered by two people from St Michael's, though the nominal status of the congregation will remain as it is for now. It is fluid partly because much of the strength of the congregation comes from university students whose Christian experience may be very limited and may be with this church for only a year or two. It is not the only place where Chinese Christians worship in York, but the demand for worship in Mandarin is there, with attendance in the high teens even in August and significantly more in term time. They occupy the church from 10am until about 2pm on Sundays, which itself poses difficulties if we were to seek to initiate new services at St Helen's, and in any case the need to support and engage with them is there. We need to initiate new discussions with St Michael's on that. Our liaison with them over the Chinese Church has not always been good, largely because it has relied on contact directly with Roger Simpson who has now stepped aside as vicar.

2012

Though there are a number of sporting events that may distract from them, 2012 is the 800th anniversary of York's charter and self-government, and the Diamond Jubilee. Because of our location it will be right to take an active part in those celebrations. Plans so far are to refurbish the clock and at least restore its striking mechanism for that year – on grounds of affordability it may be the main lasting legacy of the event to the city and gain some prominence as a consequence. Another idea is to reinstate the old tradition that the bells of St Martin should be rung to celebrate great events.

The Wednesday Study Group

Attendance at the Wednesday morning group to discuss the readings for the coming Sunday has declined. We have lost members due to age and it is rarely possible for those of working age to attend. Those who do go find it enormously valuable, and it does tend to take a moderately demanding approach to the subject. For example, a recent session moved in the last ten minutes to hermeneutics and then to whether Constantine was good for the church. The group would be reluctant to lose that sense of freedom and purpose but we probably need to explore whether we can draw in similarly minded people from other York churches, including clergy, and it may be that there would be a demand for a similar group outside working hours.

The Upper Room

The difficult access means that use of the Upper Room for public events has to be limited, but we have a policy of encouraging use for church purposes. For example, we are again hosting the Cranmer Hall Fresh Expressions course for a week this July. The greatest barrier to use is probably ignorance that the facility exists.

It contains an unusually good library for a parish church. Most of the time access is only available to church key holders, and none of us are fully aware of what it contains. Sorting it out would be a big task, and the effort worthwhile only if the books were entered into a computer database and accurately classified, tasks which could probably be split. We continue to hope to find somebody with laptop, skills, patience and time to spare. Access will be easier once we fit keypad security to the vestry as planned. It is not the only religious library in the city by any means, but if a catalogue could be made available online it might well find local users.

Our links with the wider church

Within the small PCC we have members who are active in deanery and diocesan synod. Both readers play a part at St Olave's, one takes evensong at All Saints Pavement and another occasionally elsewhere. One reader is a very faithful attender at the Wednesday prayer breakfast of York church leaders, one PCC member volunteers in the office at St Michael le Belfrey and is a member of the hospital chaplaincy team, one is organist and director of music at Central Methodist Church, one is attempting to launch a deanery initiative on provision for the elderly, another is active in the Iona community. Members play an active part in the William Temple association in York. Five of the PCC are also members of St Olave's PCC. There are other examples. The downside is that the time we have to devote to St Helen and St Martin is limited, but undoubtedly we have a more rounded understanding of our place in the city and the church. We may need to say that more positively when explaining apparent lack of action on some of these topics.