

A REPORT TO St Catherines and Cornwell Community Churches
ABOUT THEIR INTERVIEWS ON
CONGREGATIONAL MISSION AND MINISTRY
from
The Congregational Discovery Reading Team
Church Innovations Institute

How to Use this Report

This report gives the major findings of a self-study by members of the congregation about the character of worship, education, and general involvement of members, as well as the congregation's responses to community and congregational changes. It is based on 22 interviews, gathered over the summer of 2018.

We believe these findings should be taken seriously even though they are based on information from a moderate number of interviews. Leaders should consider their own reflections and use common sense about the issues raised in this report, building on the strengths of the two churches while addressing problem areas as opportunities for further growth as a congregation.

We believe that both the interviewers and those with whom they talked have the best interests of St Catherines and Cornwell at heart and gave information they hope will help the congregation.

Our recommendations are meant as questions, not to tell the congregation what to do. We believe that your congregation's continuing work in mission, particularly with the Partnership for Missional Church, may help it address some of the opportunities discovered in these interviews. We also believe the congregation's leadership has the wisdom and ability to best address its own situation.

All of the people who took time to answer these interview questions, and most certainly the Listening Leaders who did so many splendid interviews, should be commended for their willingness to think seriously about your congregation's members' past and present experiences of worship, learning, change, and mission. Such careful and helpful work will be of dramatic value as we all consider what God is up to in the community and what God is calling St. Catherines and Cornwell Community Churches to do here. As we seek to build on strengths, we remember that God equips us for every good work and that we lead by the grace of God's gifts to us.

Tilehurst St Catherine and Cornwell Community Church Congregational Discovery Interviews

Initial Noticing:

A good mix of inside family, inside stranger and 5 outside strangers

1 interviewee aged 30-39

2 interviewees aged 40-49

18 interviewees aged 50 +

(1 age unknown)

Only 1 interviewee was not UK White (1 x category R)

Question one: Tell a story about how you sense God's presence and activity in this congregation.

Interviews (22); responses (51)

How is God's presence and activity sensed?

In worship (11)

Prayers and Prayer Ministry (3)

A 'this time tomorrow interview' (2)

Togetherness and sharing time (2)

In testimonies (2)

In relationship (13)

Care for each other/supporting each other (3)

Sharing time and experiences in the week (4)

Groups to pray and study together

In the welcome back

Through what God has provided through the church e.g. support and assistance

Faith of members

Sincerity of individuals

In being listened to

In feeling and experience (19)

God's presence in difficult times/all times (3)

Answered prayer (3)

Expectation

Warmth of the spirit/ Awareness of the Spirit resting on people

More so when younger

Experiencing God prompting them to remain when they wanted to leave

A particular service
Prayers with team.
Feeling Jesus
God given wisdom and knowledge
Meditating on him
In healing
Trusting in God
Self-reflection
Discomfort

In a practical project (8)

Pulling together as a congregation in the time without a vicar (2)
In new opportunities
In the new Café
“Most activity happens outside the church”
Prayer on the street
In service
In joining the PMC process
Giving back to the church

Noticing & Questions

God’s activity is experienced in relationship and in shared activity.
Prayer and answers to prayer are significant in the answers. How could these stories and practices be heard and experienced more widely?
There is a deep care for each other that features in several answers. Are you aware of this?
There is a significant personal awareness of God’s presence and activity. Again do you know this is one of your gifts and how might you grow and share it?
A theme that emerges is the life and reward that has come through working together, how could this be built on?

The last section of responses about experiencing God on the edge of or outside of the church is significant for us. How have these things come about (e.g. new Café) and how do you learn from them?

Question two: Describe an experience of profound worship you have had.

22 interviews; 52 responses

In Worship (15)

God speaking through a hymn
Sometimes a physical reaction during worship and prayer
Answers/clarification through sermons or readings

Through the Healing Prayer
Calling out praise and thanks
Singing at the end of an informal Father's day service alongside another church
Joint Service
Laying on of hands
Profound feeling by the congregation
The Pentecost Service
Holy Week at Communion
Sitting in the Sanctuary
Church feeding the mind
A hope of living in light of "Feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving"
A service taken by the new vicar

At other events (10)

Communion from Hospital Chaplain
Worshipping with others at Spring Harvest
Singing in a Cathedral choir
A John Wimber Conference
Cape Town cathedral
Alpha Course at a different church
"Open to God" services in the 80's
Large Christian Events
Spring Harvest
Tilehurst Free Church

Other (2)

Through music
Through nature and creation

Emotions/feelings expressed (25)

Profound and overwhelming (2)
Welcomed
Feeling of heat in the hands
Moved
Reassured
The energy
Healing power
Beginning of personal healing
Love and worship
Music and freedom
Not wanting it to end
Made me so happy
Sensing the Holy Spirit
The overwhelming presence of God
A feeling of being hugged ('more subtle than profound but no less meaningful')
Felt like one of the original apostles, 'feeling the unity and continuity of the church'

Realizing that 'being' is amazing
Something that comes later
Noting fear from the past about people falling over in prayer, but wouldn't cause fear now
The need to feel safe for 'good worship'
Thankfulness
A new start
A revelation
"My first Pentecost"

Noticing & Questions

A large proportion of those interviewed have had profound experiences of God ... many of which have been in the corporate worship. All of the respondents described an experience of God. There is a rich encounter with, and articulation of, emotional and sensory experiences. How might you celebrate this real depth of spirituality? How could it be turned outwards to join in with what God is also up to in your community/s?

The congregation is blessed by people involved in wider networks and experiences of the Christian Faith. How might insights from these networks encourage and challenge you regularly?

Question three: Tell about the ways people fight in this congregation. Tell about a situation where you and other people were involved in a problem at church and how it was handled.

22 interviews; 46 responses

How do people fight?

Situations of Conflict (29)

Not aware of anything/ not involved (13)
There has been conflict (2)
Change (2)
CCC and St Catherines (2) still to be resolved (2)
Strong characters thinking they are always right
Non-spiritual issues
Ministers views
Issues around new technology
Disagreement with a church member
Negative attitudes to Diocese re Church merge
Negative feedback to house-group
Café management

How is conflict handled? (11)

Respect each other and differences of opinion
Try to resolve at early stage with respect and taking into account different views
Prayer
Meeting and discussion
Trying to engage with sensitivities of the group
Consider feelings of others
Sometimes wise to conceal your own opinions
Bickering is usually resolved
People wear masks to get through
Some fights not resolved
Listening

Other Comments (3)

[People are] only human and get niggled sometimes
All have prejudices and difficult to be wise
Work well together in Holiday club and Messy Church

Effects of conflict (3)

People missing (2)
Impact on church

Noticing and Questions

Conflict is not a universal experience, over half of the respondents did not speak of any conflict. Those who did were clear that it does exist and a few said that leaving church may be one way it is dealt with. How do you account for these differences and responses?

It seemed that a good number of the answers to how conflict is resolved were suggested approaches. Is there a need for the Church(es) to look at how their conflicts are heard, explored and handled? PMC has some approaches that may be able to help you here

The Church merge still a tension for some with hurt evident. There is a desire to resolve conflict and to work together amongst some. Who are the peacemakers? How might you have a discernment conversation around how you are God's people together?

Question four: Tell a memory that gives you anxiety about the future of this congregation. Tell a memory that gives you hope.

22 interviews; 55 responses

Causes of anxiety (33)

Aging congregation (5)
Small/dwindling congregation (2)

Noisy Children and/or reactions to (2)
The lack of young people (2)
Younger families go to Cornwell (2)
Committee members and leaders stretched too far
Burden falls to the old
Divided church
The Thursday service growing and becoming less intimate
People have left through disagreement
A family that no longer come
Dwindling Sunday School
In what I know
Only 1 family at Family Service leading to being self-conscious
No new faces
Negative behaviour
Lack of clergy involvement in Sunday school
Drive to get more names on the electoral role
Not enough people reading their Bibles
Difficult to change attitudes
The lack of results from Away day
Promises not realised
New Vicar
Lack of traditional hymns
Rift between the two churches

Memories that give hope (10)

Working together e.g. the Fair
That I would be mourned by the congregation
Young people playing in the worship band
Shoebox Service
Appreciation by Café Customers (many not church goers)
Holiday club with teenage involvement and help
Remembering 1980's Church
Encouraging one another
Being integrated into church family
A visiting speaker encouraging a new opportunity

Hopes (13)

Arrival of new vicar (2)
For a Sunday School
Lots of children playing music
New people encountering the kind congregation
Someone who changed in attitude to young people
Continuing relationship with community
Vision
God's Presence ('worship is vital')
The café attracting young people
"In the new"

Return to the 80's Church and all the services/age ranges
In the people being prayed for

Noticing and Questions

Tensions emerging again in the answers between Cornwell CC and St Catherines. Why do you think this might be and how could you respond?

We wonder whether nostalgia about the past is making journeying into the future difficult as 'success' is framed around what it used to look like? Do you agree? What other reasons might be holding you back? Your Timeline event results might also help you here.

The answers are rich with hope, how do you imagine these hopes might live and become embodied by you all in light of the anxieties you also have?

Young people are connected to the hopes expressed, how are they listened to and involved in PMC and wider?

Question five: If you were to leave this congregation for five years without any contact, what would you expect to see when you returned. What would you hope to see?

22 interviews; 64 responses

Expect to see (14)

Same but with fewer people (5)

New faces

Continuing trend of ageing families

New Vicar still there

Loss of people

75% of people to have left

Not much change

present youngsters might not be attending

Church still running

Growth through growing local population

Hope to see (48)

New faces (5)

Congregation had grown (4)

To see same people (4)

More young people (3)

People of all ages/wider age range (3)

More families (2)

Serving the wider community (2)

Change and different ways of doing things (2)

More people at Messy Church and Holiday Club

To see things continuing

The church to still be welcoming, thriving (but still recognisable)

Service and worship unchanged
Large congregation
Lots of singing
Trying new ways of praying
Hope for participation of teenagers/young adults.
More going on.
A welcoming/friendly face whenever you walk in.
Baptisms within the main service
Stronger links with Cornwell CC
More people involved
More outward activity
Other religions in church
Love breaking through the wider culture of 'unknowing'
Church family to keep in touch
A happy, thriving church
Hope in the new leader
Lively committed people
Experimental service
A notice sheet that illustrated new initiatives
Still linked with Cornwell

Other (2)

'Latest ideas seem possible'
We need to change the way people feel inside.

Noticing and Questions

There is a deep affection for people there and a hope they would still be there in five years. There is outward focus in many of the answers. There are very many more hopes than anxieties. Do you recognise yourselves as hopeful churches? As in the previous question, how might the hopes expressed be explored and embodied?

There is what we call a 'minority report' where a few people express hopes for staying linked and even strengthening the connections between your two churches. How might this come about? What giftings might both churches bring to joining in with what God is up to in your community/s?

Question six: Describe this congregation to someone new and tell how they would be nurtured here

22 interviews; 103 responses

Descriptions of Congregation (69)

Elderly/ageing (7)
Welcoming (7)

Caring (5)
Friendly (5)
All age/wide age range (3)
Accepting of different needs (2)
A family/family atmosphere (3)
Praying (2)
Informal/casual (2)
No children in main service (2)
Uncomplicated liturgy (2)
Not too large
Quite a lot of outreach groups
Accommodating
All skills welcome
Willing to help
Informal
Supportive
Middle-aged
There are children
Considerate
Made up of different worship groups
Committed
A lot going on
Different stages of faith
Young people at Cornwell
Anglican
Middle of the Road
Old and new music
All white
Look after disabled
Been together for years
Age range imbalance
Make an effort
Warm
God-centred
Lots of singing
Mostly women
Modern music
Some have left

Ways they would be nurtured in Church (22)

Welcomed ("first impressions count") (5)
Through chatting (2)
Introductions (2)
Noticed
Looked after
Invited in
Taken under the wing

Included in service/church
Age range helps Bible engagement and application
Through friendliness
Variety of services
Nurtured by all.
Not left alone
Pastoral help available
Encouraged to stay for coffee
Social support

Ways they would be nurtured in other activities (11)

Coffee & chat in café (2)
Life groups (2)
MU support (3)
Messy Church
Advent/Lent Groups
Friendly mixed groups
Invited [to other activities]

Other (1)

Grew in confidence, care and closeness during interregnum

Noticing & Questions

Welcome and Friendliness appears often, which appears to be a real strength. Do you agree?
How might you check out whether this is the actual experience of newcomers amongst you?

The Interviewees had previously detailed rich and deep spiritual experience, but developing and growing spiritual life did not seem to be a key part of the nurture patterns expressed. Do you agree? How could your obvious spiritual depth and the relational way you welcome people be connected and 'journey' together?

There is a lot of nurture expected around initial meetings and welcome, beyond this initial phase what patterns are there for ongoing involvement and discipleship? How might someone who wasn't a Christian find faith amongst you?

Question Seven: What tells you God is present here in worship

22 interviews; 58 responses

'Here in Worship' (53)

See it in others/Church Family (7)
Singing/hymns/music/worship (8)
Feelings/emotion (7) e.g. 'refreshment and uplifting
In the prayers (4)
Bible/interpretation (3)
I assume he is (2)
Within ourselves (2)
I feel God's presence all around me
He is looking after me
In the Prayer cards
In answers to prayer
A feeling beyond the words and music
In challenge of leaders
In thoughts
In images
In God calling us
In Holy communion
In engaging with God
Sometimes sermons
In testimonies
More so when the Holy Spirit is active
Shared experience
Heat and burning palms
Unique Peace
Joy
In the leaders
He is always there

At other times and places (2)

God is always with me (2)

Other (3)

Found it hard to find God in Worship
It's variable
Music group try but not inspiring

Noticing and Questions

It is interesting to us that another worship question was chosen. There is something very important to the churches about collective worship. Why do you think this is? How does your worship connect with life from Monday-Saturday?

There is a vibrant and large range of positive experiences expressed. We noted that there is a significant amount of 'charismatic' experience that is expressed and once again hope

ripples through the answers. Where and how can people talk about their experiences of God such that others both within and outside the church can share in them?

Question eight: Tell about how you and others feel about the changes in this congregation in the past three to five years.

22 interviews; 52 responses

Congregation has shrunk (4)
Good visiting ministers during interregnum (3)
There has been no change (3)
Changes (2)
Loss of families (2)
Numbers the same (2)
Café successful (2)
I see the same people
See the priests finding it hard to draw people together
Felt despondent and isolated in the past
The Café has brought people together
Thursday service grew during interregnum
Interregnum led to more friendliness
Struggling to attract new people
No change in service
Difficult to pitch children's activities
Pleasing that older people come
Difficult to attract families
Loyal membership (people only leave when they move away)
Have a garden room
Improved facilities
New vicar is a people person
Café and new facilities
People encouraged in
Unsettled through extension
Congregation supporting new activities
St Birinus disconnected (people not then coming to St Catherines)
Sad organ is no longer used
New building looks like a hospital
Problems for music group
More freedom in service
Free flowing communion
Children encouraged
Difficulty during building work.
Gap between churches wider since awayday.
Work well together for Messy Church/Holiday club though.
People felt uneasy

Air of anticipation with new incumbent.
People no longer feel threatened.
More confident.
'Can't comment'

Noticing & Questions

Many of the answers give a narrative rather than describing feelings about the changes – why do you think this might be? What do you think people are feeling overall about where you are now?

Some respondents see change and some see a lack of change, very different experiences are expressed. Nevertheless many of the answers are 'future looking' and imbued with energy and hope. How might you 'pull together' and continue on the PMC spiritual journey of discovery into God's 'preferred and promised' future for you?

CONCLUSIONS

Overall Noticing & Questions

We saw really lovely comments about the age range and mix of people, however the listening exercise mainly engaged the 50 + and no one below 30. How might children, young people and young adults be engaging in the listening and in the subsequent conversations?

We wonder if the development and existence of the Café might be a signpost and location where you can learn more about what God is up to. Learning from how it came about and what happens there could be key for the future. Do you agree?

Across the life of Cornwell CC and St Catherines there seems to be much to celebrate but also tensions between the two congregations. How might the togetherness and the separate giftings and callings be journeyed with and supported? How might the whole become greater than the sum of the two parts?

You are really hopeful churches! How can you channel the spiritual energy that comes from hope into realising and embodying God's future for you?