

PARISH COUNCIL Meeting 21 July 2019

On Friday, I am to bury at Ss. Stephen's and Mary's a founding member of Ascension Church, and an early organist here. How is it that, with her living all these years a few streets from Ascension, she is to have her service elsewhere? Yesterday, at St Paul's Cathedral, I met sometime parishioners, who still live near Ascension, but now head the flower guild at the cathedral? Their mother's name could be read in our memorial book this week. They sometime come to place flowers in the memorial garden.

How do we respond to people who were once our dear congregants, but who have drifted to other churches or have absented themselves from the parish completely? These people are more mobile and have more options; some now consider frequent churchgoing as optional. These tell themselves that they no longer need the embracing mission of the Church, in the way they once believed necessary. Even committed Church members may attend less frequently for many reasons, generally social. We truly lament the decreasing attendance numbers. Our task must be to identify these, to embrace them and empathize with them, always leaving the church door open for their return. Perhaps we could remember to invite the parish "sleepers" to functions not specifically "churchy." We have done this for "Christmas in July," the Soup Lunch and we hope to see strange faces at the Trivia Night and the musical soirees.

We must never judge people for not realizing the beauty of frequent church-going, lest we turn them away. People can smell being judged at a distance. If we encounter them, we must try to enthruse them and invite them into a deeper commitment to the parish. Perhaps these people have not rejected the Church; they still love the Church. There are just too many other interests taking up church time.

We attendees grew up with a mother, usually, rousing us for a very early Holy Communion, then Matins, and Sunday-School, Sometimes we attended Evensong. This was what one did on Sundays. How did this commitment wane to creeping in to the one Sunday Eucharist, often-times after the first hymn as begun?

Was there ever a true relationship with Jesus, or a relationship to lead people to Jesus? If so, how can we re-jig the preaching, the music, any creative elements? Perhaps the children should on occasion stand around the altar table and hold vessels. Can they be any more involved, in bringing up the gifts, et cetera? We surely must prioritize our children for our future.

We must be obsessed with our mission, and think out fresh, untried ways of encouraging people, and challenging them to re-engage further by personal relationships. Social media may help people to develop and deepen their journey towards Jesus, but person-to-person communication is always best. The Sunday homilies are now available. Perhaps copies of the Sunday lectionary readings could be added? In this way, we may help people to be at church-in-their-homes or at the workplace, and not just being physically in the Ascension building. If able to locate an address of a first-time attender, a follow-up note may be a way of acknowledging their presence. Do people believe that they can stay "connected" by media? Podcasting et cetera, have brought church into home living-rooms. All the favourite hymns

can be in one's phone now. Two out of five couples today meet on-line, but don't stay on-line; they settle to marry or partner. Love can be expressed on-line, but fulfilment happens through personal contact.

We tend to fade from church gradually. We begin by dropping from weekly attendance to twice a month, to stopping altogether.

Why do we stay away from Sunday church, but would never think to stay away from a Sunday birthday party after church? Why will a few drops of rain keep folk at home, but, the same folk will huddle in a down-pour to watch football or lacrosse? Are we a low-expectation church? My school was the worst hindrance to encouraging church-going among the young. Friday night, out with Brad or too tired for anything else. Saturday, sports, rowing, equestrian, snow-sports, rowing, athletics. Possibly too tired for anything else but Brad. Sunday morning, too tired for an early start with church, as drama, music and theatre begin quite early. Homework is to be done in the afternoon, with a collapse or Brad on Sunday evening. The Church does not feature strongly.

Over to you. Walter