

SABBATICAL REPORT (22 MAY – 20 AUGUST 2017)

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Sabbaticals are granted to long-serving clergy for the purposes of rest, recreation, personal development and study. (The first sentence on the Diocesan Clerical Sabbatical Information and Application Form).

In September it will be 20 years since I was ordained Deacon. I had dreamed of taking a Sabbatical for a long time – one of my contemporaries back in Liverpool took one about 10 years ago! But this year, everything seemed to come together:

- The idea of attempting to cycle from Lands End to John O’Groats (LeJoG) had taken hold – the idea not being to cycle by myself, but with my sons Nathan (16) and Joel (12), with my husband Steve providing back-up in the car. This year was the only year it would have been possible, as Nathan finished school early after his GCSE exams, and Joel was still young enough to miss a few weeks of school without it causing any lasting problems.
- The opportunity of looking at churches doing a weekly All-Age Worship service was one which fitted well with both the fact that we started such a service at St John’s (Rhosnesni) in January 2015, and with the Diocesan emphasis on growth, and discovering new ways of being and doing church.
- After a number of years of lots of changes, and vacancies, within the Team in Wrexham, things are now much more stable, making it easier to manage cover during the three months of my Sabbatical.

I hadn’t realised how all-consuming LeJoG would become. I began the Sabbatical five weeks before we left home, and spent much of that time in preparation – both getting physically fit, and planning routes etc. I am not going to write much about the trip here. I wrote a Blog as we went along, which is available to anyone who is interested: <https://lejobikeride2017.blogspot.co.uk/>

During those first weeks, I took a 5-day retreat, which was an important time of personal spiritual refreshment. I also went to a number of all-age services, and did some reading around all-age worship. My resulting reflections follow in the next section of this report.

After reaching John O’Groats, we were ready for a rest! We had a two-week family holiday, which was a very lazy time. We were definitely ready to come home by the end of it, though. I had 10 days left, to reflect on what I’d learned over the previous weeks, and prepare myself to return to parish duties.

Quentin Bellamy says in his Sabbatical report, “it is easy to slip right back into the same old routine with its resultant spiritual coldness.” As I prepare to return to parish ministry, that is one of my concerns. It would be all too easy to slip back into old routines, and return to a very poor level of both physical and spiritual fitness. The self-discipline required, not to get so caught up in the whirl of activity that is parish ministry that we lose sight of our own spiritual, emotional and physical health, is a very big demand!

ALL-AGE WORSHIP

In January 2015, we started a new service at St John Rhosnesni. We call it *Service Station: Food for Body and Soul*. It's an interactive, café-style service aimed at people of all ages, and takes place at 4.00 pm each Sunday afternoon (except for 5th Sundays).

The model we adopted was based on *Zone 2*, which started at Liverpool Cathedral in March 2011. We use an order of service which includes all the traditional elements of Anglican worship: greeting and confession, reading and talk, prayers of intercession, closing prayer/blessing, with contemporary sung worship led by a band. We serve drinks and cake etc from the beginning, and the service will always include activities, usually following the talk, as a means of enabling people to engage with the Lord through craft, reflection, discussion, music (the list goes on!). Once a month, we celebrate Communion together.

Service Station has been a very positive addition to our corporate worship. Initially, the congregation numbered less than 20, who had all been members of St John's for some time. Over time, more have joined us, some who were previously members of St John's, some who have come from other churches, and some who are new to church. Average attendance in 2016 was 22, including 7 under 16s, and I expect this year's average to be slightly more. There's a very positive "family" atmosphere to the service, and a spontaneous willingness to help out, especially with clearing away after the end of each service.

This experience has informed my Sabbatical project, and raised some questions. Visiting other churches who provide weekly all-age worship has given me the opportunity to experience other models in different contexts. I was interested to see if those who had been doing it for longer were also attracting and keeping new members, and the wider impact on the mission of those churches. Also, whether churches holding such a service each week consider it to be one of their main acts of worship, or rather as an 'extra' or a sideline. And I wondered to what extent they considered themselves to be a 'Fresh Expression', or more specifically a 'Messy Church'.

CHURCHES/SERVICES VISITED

'Zone 2' at Liverpool Cathedral I visited on Sunday 4 June, which was Pentecost and the end of the half-term holiday. There was a congregation of 25-30, which I was told was smaller than usual. The service took place in the Conference Room – there was a traditional service taking place in the main body of the Cathedral at the same time (this is the usual pattern).

St Nicholas', Codsall, Wolverhampton I visited on Sunday 11 June, which was Trinity Sunday. It was the day of the nearby Cosford Airshow, which may have accounted for reduced numbers of about 40-50. The service took place in the church, following the 9.30 Parish Communion.

Lymm Methodist Church I visited on Sunday 18 June, which was Father's Day. It was also beautiful weather, so once again, not as many in the congregation as normal. The service took place in the main hall at 5.00 pm on Sunday.

Holy Nativity, Mixenden, Halifax I visited on 2 July. The service took place in church, and had a bigger congregation than usual because it was the day after the new curate had been ordained Deacon, and people had come from her sending church to support her. It is the only Sunday service at Holy Nativity, so it is the main act of worship.

In addition, I sent a copy of the list of questions I had devised for the church leaders to St Mary with St Alban, Teddington, and St Martin, Brighouse, West Yorkshire.

It wasn't easy to identify churches running a weekly all-age service! I did so by a variety of methods, mainly through word-of-mouth and appeals through clergy Facebook groups. I would have hoped for a wider spread of denominations and non-denominational churches, but those I did identify were all Anglican, with the one exception of Lymm Methodist Church.

These are the questions I asked, together with a summary of the answers I received:

1. How long has your church been doing weekly All-Age Worship?

The answers to this varied from about 1 year (Brighouse), to about 12 years (Codsall). The next longest after Codsall was Liverpool Cathedral.

2. Why did you adopt this pattern?

There were as many answers to this question as churches named above! They included the positive aims of promoting worship for all, providing a worship time which didn't conflict with sporting activities etc, responding to demand from families, and increasing the diversity of the congregation. Some churches were responding to a lack of children and/or Sunday School leaders.

3. Is it considered to be your main act of worship (or one of your main services)?

Every church answered 'yes' to this question, except for one which has a very complicated pattern.

4. Why do you meet at this time, on this day?

(NB all the services I identified meet on a Sunday). Answers to this were either that this is the traditional time for worship in this church, or that it fits in with other services – although one church had thought about how it would fit in with the kind of activities which many families are involved in on Sundays (see 2 above). After experimenting, one church found that Sunday mornings worked better than Sunday afternoons in their context.

5. How long does the service last, and why this length?

Answers varied from 30 mins – 1 hour 15 minutes, but for most about 1 hour is the norm. There wasn't much response to the second part of the question ('why').

6. Does the service always include activities?

For those who are able to hold their service 'café style', activities are an important part of their worship, whether in their own slot or as part of the talk or prayers. For those working in a more traditional church building, it's much harder, and 'activities' tend to be provided for children only, in the form of colouring, puzzles or worksheets.

7. How many people are involved in planning and preparation?

It's hard to evaluate answers to this question! Answers ranged from "1 – the Vicar", to up to 30, including groups who provide welcomers, tea-makers, etc. For most, the planning and preparation of the service is done either by one person every week, or by one person each week (not always the same person), or a small group of 3 or 4.

8. What, if any, relationship would you say your service has to Messy Church or Fresh Expressions?

Messy Church would usually only meet once a month, and not usually on a Sunday.¹ It is a particular Fresh Expression of Church which is gaining in popularity at the moment. So a weekly all-age Sunday service is not 'Messy Church', even if there is some overlap.

Most of these churches would say that their service isn't a Fresh Expression, although Richard White at Zone 2 says that Zone 2 "fits the definition of a Fresh Expression".

9. Does the congregation really include people of all ages (not just families with young children)?

Most replied positively to this question. Some older people come along to these services very happily. In my observations, most of the congregations I visited included a wide range of ages. Few would have older children coming independently of their parents, although one or two did.

10. Does the service attract and keep new people? Where do they come from? (Baptism contacts, friends of the congregation, etc)

Almost all said 'yes' they attract new people. Keeping them is never so easy! They come from: Baptism contacts, friends of the congregation, new people moving into the area, contacts through weddings, contacts through schools work, website and social media, *Alpha*

11. Do members meet at other times, eg for Bible Study, Toddler Group, etc?

These churches all have other groups and activities, which members of the All-Age service attend.

12. What would you say are the advantages and disadvantages of this service?

For most, the advantages are around people of all ages worshipping together, coming together as God's family, accommodating those at any stage of development, enjoyment, and being weekly means it's part of the routine of life.

The disadvantages are that it's labour intensive, and (especially for café-style worship), doesn't make space for growth in numbers. It's hard to build in the opportunity for quietness and listening in this style of worship.

13. What impact has it had on the mission of this church?

The answers to this question clearly varied in relation to how long weekly all-age worship had been part of the routine. For most, starting weekly all-age worship has resulted in numerical growth leading to spiritual growth for those who attend, and diversification in terms of the age of church members, and the style of worship on offer. For one church, it's an easy 'way into' church, and even those who only come for a short while have a positive experience of church.

14. Can you recommend any good books to read on All-Age Worship?

(NB this list combines things I've read, along with others which have been recommended by churches I've visited; some focus mainly on suggested services/elements of worship, while others are more about the theological rationale for all-age worship, or indeed all-age church).

Mike Bossingham, Building Family Friendly Churches (Methodist Publishing House, 2004; ISBN 978 1 85852 254 8)

* Nick Harding, All-Age Everything (Kevin Mayhew, 2001; ISBN 1 84003 809 8)

* Chris and John Leach, How to Plan and Lead All-Age Worship (Grove Booklet W194, 2008; ISBN 978 1 85174 678 1)

* Sandra Millar, Worship Together (introduction) (SPCK, 2012; ISBN 978 0 28106 629 2)

Sandra Millar, Festivals Together (introduction) (SPCK, 2012; ISBN 978 0 28106 631 5)

* Lucy Moore, All-Age Worship (The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2010; ISBN 978 1 84101 432 6)

* Philip Mounstephen and Kelly Martin, Body Beautiful? (Grove Booklet P99, 2004; ISBN 1 85174 573 4)

Rachel Nicholls, The Feast is Ready to Begin (introduction) (Kevin Mayhew, 2009; ISBN 978 1 84867 176 8)

Gretchen Wolff Pritchard, Offering the Gospel to Children, (Cowley Publications, 1992; ISBN 978 1 56101 065 3)

* *These are the books I have read, or glanced through, during my Sabbatical.*

REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE AND READING

St John Rhosnesni started *Service Station* through force of circumstance. For many years, we had run a Sunday Club alongside one of our Sunday morning services, it had come to the end of the road, and we found ourselves with no Sunday Club leaders and very few children attending Sunday worship. There was no longer the possibility of holding a contemporary service on a Sunday morning. In effect, we made a virtue out of a necessity: we chose 4.00 – 5.00 pm as the time for our new service, because it's after most other Sunday activities have finished and the shops have closed, but early enough not to encroach on bedtime for small children.

Our experience at St John's, borne out by the experience of the churches I have visited and contacted, is that a weekly service for all ages builds community, and is attractive and accessible for people who are new to church. Reflecting on that experience, and on the reading I have done, I am becoming more and more convinced that we have been led by the Holy Spirit into rediscovering a vital aspect of what it means to be church.

The format of our services actively encourages members of the congregation to engage with each other throughout the worship time, as they take part in multi-sensory prayers and activities. At times, it might give a newcomer the impression that there is more chit-chat than worship taking place! But over the months, it became clear to me that what was happening was true fellowship. Conversation and communication takes place at a much deeper level as people engage together with activities which encourage reflection on the Bible passage for the day and what the Lord might be saying to each of us, both individually and corporately. People come to care deeply about one another, and become involved in each other's lives. I am convinced that this is the reason for the beautiful atmosphere as we gather for worship, and for the feeling that this congregation has become a true church family.

Sandra Millar, Lucy Moore and Philip Mounstephen and Kelly Martin in the books listed above, all point out that in Scripture, any gathering of God's people, whether in the Old Testament or the New, is assumed to be multi-generational. We are made in God's image and called to reflect his character – the character of the Holy Trinity. His covenant people are called to live and worship in community, and that community includes people of all ages. Mounstephen and Martin's contention is that the church in the UK over the last 60 years or so has become a dysfunctional family, where the norm is to segregate the body of Christ by age, and the danger of 'Fresh Expressions' is that they can exacerbate the situation by further segregating the church into specific cultural and social groups. 'Fresh Expressions' need to be recognised for what they are – a missionary outreach – and not become a norm for church life. Mounstephen and Martin also insist that the church should be a fully integrated all-age/multigenerational community – 'all-age' is not just about what we do when we gather for corporate worship, but is also about our ministry and growth.

One of the disadvantages of all-age worship is that it's labour intensive – preparation is hard work, and time-consuming. The small amount of reading and reflection which I have done round this subject over the last three months, together with my experience of visiting other churches, encourages me that the hard work is well worth it, and that we should be actively seeking to embed the values of all-age church in all that we do as God's people in C21 Britain.

ALL-AGE WORSHIP RESOURCES

It's been suggested that it would be useful to include a list of resources. I tend to mix and match from a number of resources, and adapt them to our own situation. These are the ones I use most often:

Old Oak Resources: this is a free web-based resource set up by the folk who run Zone 2 at Liverpool Cathedral: <http://oldoakresources.com/>

Roots on the Web: a lectionary-based resource available by subscription. Current material is in magazines which are published six times a year; the website gives access to both current and past material: <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/> (I would not be without *Roots* – there's always something I can use in their material).

Creative-Church: free web-based resource: <http://www.creative-church.com/>

Engage Worship: free web-based resource: <https://engageworship.org/ideas>

Flame – Creative Children’s Ministry: free web-based resource:
<http://flamecreativekids.blogspot.co.uk/>

Mustard Seeds: free web-based resource: <http://seedstuff.blogspot.co.uk/>

The Reflectionary: free web-based resource: <https://reflectionary.org/>

All-Age Lectionary Services (Scripture Union) *One book for each lectionary year:*

Year A (SU, 2010; ISBN 978 1 84427 504 5)

Year B (SU, 2011; ISBN 978 1 84427 545 8)

Year C (SU, 2012; ISBN 978 1 84427 641 7)

David Adam, Searchlights Complete Resource Book, (Kevin Mayhew)

Year A (Kevin Mayhew, 2007; ISBN 978 184417 729 5)

Year B (Kevin Mayhew, 2005; ISBN 1 84417 427 1)

Year C (Kevin Mayhew, 2006; ISBN 1 84417 655 X)

Claire Benton-Evans, All Sorts Prayer, (Kevin Mayhew, 2010;
ISBN 978 1 84867 261 1)

Claire Benton-Evans, All Sorts Prayer 2, (Kevin Mayhew, 2011;
ISBN 978 1 84867 432 5)

Susan Sayers, Living Stones Complete Resource Book, (Kevin Mayhew)

Year A (Kevin Mayhew, 1998/2001; ISBN 1 84003 212 X)

Year B (Kevin Mayhew, 1999; ISBN 1 84003 396 7)

Year C (Kevin Mayhew, 1997; ISBN 1 84003 009 7)

Stuart Thomas, Come to the Feast, (Kevin Mayhew, 2002; ISBN 1 84003 975 2)

¹ See the Messy Church website: <https://www.messychurch.org.uk/what-messy-church-and-isnt>