

TRANSFORMING CHURCH – COMING TO ST HILDA'S

Those of you who are observant may have noticed that the apple tree we planted outside the church in early March was showing early signs of fruit by mid-June.

The enthusiast in me was all excited. But turning to one who is wise in these things, I sought the advice of Martin Hadlington. Martin had noticed the dozen little apples as well. His advice was that they should all be removed immediately. This seemed a little harsh. But the wisdom that lay behind it was sound: if the tree puts all its energy into producing fruit at this stage then its roots will not develop well. And if it is not firmly rooted then future fruit and growth will suffer.

So, midway through writing this (June 15th), I popped across to the tree and removed the marble-sized apple buds. They sit in a sad little pile beside my laptop as I write. Fruit sacrificed for the greater good and growth of the tree. Now may its roots be strengthened.

In the Christian year we are entering the season which is called Ordinary Time. After all the busy-ness, stretching, challenge and stimulation of the seasons of Lent, Easter and Pentecost, it is good to come into the apparently more mundane cycle of ordinary time. It stretches through the summer, into autumn and ultimately comes to an end as we approach Advent. But do not be fooled into thinking that nothing is going on in ordinary time! Just as we cannot now see the root system of the apple tree develop and grow, neither can we necessarily always see the sort of growth that God is doing in and through us. In the next few months we are going to find that the idea of growth is going to be popping up all over the place.

As you will see, the idea of growth is very much on my mind this month. Immediately after writing this article, I am going on a conference called *Leading your church into growth*. I suspect you will be hearing more about this through the coming year. Another thing you are going to hear a lot more of is a very positive initiative that every church in the Diocese of Birmingham is being invited to get involved in: it is called *Transforming Church*. [Funnily enough, just as I was writing that last paragraph, what should drop through the letterbox but a letter from Bishop Andrew introducing the *Transforming Church* initiative.]

When we think about growth and churches we tend to think simply that it is to do with numbers. In some senses Sunday service attendance is a good measure of growth. But is not the only measure. Some of the growth is hidden, just like the apple tree's roots. Some of it takes a long time and needs patience. Some of it is to do with deepening fellowship and trust between us. Some growth is to do with finding encouragement in fresh rhythms of prayer and worship that really transform our relationship with God at work, at home, in school and in the public places of our lives.

Transforming Church is a timely initiative for us at St Hilda's. Its aim is: '*growing churches at the heart of each community*'. It provides us as a church with a framework to begin to ask where God is taking us. It is designed to be a gift to us and not a burden (sometimes people grown when initiatives are 'foisted' on them). It is designed to help us to be encouraged by the things that we do well as a church community and to build on our strengths. It is also designed to help us see our calling as a church with fresh eyes.

Over the next few months, every church in the diocese will begin to engage with *Transforming Church*. Each parish will have a consultant appointed to work alongside the incumbent, wardens, PCC and the wider church community. That person will have experience in encouraging church communities to explore their particular calling. They will be invited to look at seven areas of transformation:

worship: drawing us into the presence of the Living God

relationships: finding healing, encouragement and challenge through our life together.

discipleship: enabling us to grow as confident followers of Jesus

leadership: releasing and harnessing the gifts of all God's people

presence: living out God's love in our communities and the wider world

outreach: leading others to believe in Jesus and belong to his body

partnerships: working together with people of goodwill to see God's purposes fulfilled.

This is a framework for discussions. It is not a blueprint which sets out to produce an identikit church.

A timetable has been put together to help us and all the other parishes. At the July meeting of the PCC, we will begin to explore the process. Later in the summer we will be matched with a consultant who will come alongside us to help us. Each member of the congregation will be given a

booklet giving more details about *Transforming Church*, which includes some very interesting and helpful questions for us all to think about. Then, through the autumn and winter, we will begin the journey of exploration.

This is timely for St Hilda's because it will help us together as a church community to listen more closely to each other and to God's promptings and guidance. This whole process is not about generating hundreds of wonderful ideas or jettisoning the past. It is about prayerfully catching God's vision for St Hilda's and discerning together how that vision will take root and grow us as a church at the heart of Warley Woods.

I end with Paul's prayer in Ephesians: "I pray... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are rooted and grounded in love... Now to him who by the power at work in us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen."

Paul

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