

Sunday Services Review

Yearbook 2024

Introduction

As part of the PCM's¹ Away Day on Saturday 16th March this year we spent some time reviewing our services on Sunday and Wednesday. We all thought it would be helpful to communicate what we talked about more widely, starting from the beginning of the recent journey which has led us to two services on a Sunday morning.



The Original Vision and Decision Making Process

The Parish Profile,² written in 2018 as part of the search for a new rector, identified that APC was 'standing on the threshold of a new era' and acknowledged that 'doing more of the same' was not what the church should be doing in its next phase of life, and that there was a need to be open to change. I was asked at interview what my vision would be for crossing this threshold and I replied that I didn't know at that stage, and that it would be a matter of prayerfully discerning, along with the wardens and the PCM, what God was calling us to.

We began this work properly in 2019 and during the year the PCM began to consider the possibility of holding Sunday Worship in the Church Centre as well as in the Parish Church on a Sunday morning. The primary drivers were (1) that we were routinely over the 80%

¹ 'PCM' stands for 'Parish Church Meeting'. It is the wider leadership body of Aldridge Parish Church, which sits under the Parochial Church Council, the trustees of the whole Parish of Aldridge.

² The 2018 Parish Profile can be read here <https://alldridgeparish.org.uk/resources/documents/2024-03-16-06633762.pdf>. The quoted remarks are on page 5.

capacity mark in the Parish Church on a Sunday morning (the level at which it is widely recognized that newcomers feel that there is no space for them), and (2) that it wasn't the friendliest way to treat newcomers with children to ask them to deliver them to the Church Centre for Sunday School and then leave them with people they didn't know whilst they returned to the Parish Church. The idea began to form of 'planting' a congregation in the Church Centre on a Sunday morning.

In order to facilitate thinking this through we invited everyone to participate in a survey in the summer of 2019, and the PCM continued to discuss it. On 9th September we took a formal vote on the proposal, which was carried with 19 in favour, none against, and one abstention. The text of this proposal is attached as an appendix to this report.

We then held a well-attended whole church consultation on 28th November 2019 to start to flesh out the details of how it might develop. The working plan was to begin this pattern of worship in the following autumn of 2020.

Developments During the Covid Years 2020-2021

However, as we all remember well, our lives changed radically in March 2020. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York instructed all churches in the Church of England to cease in-person services of worship from Mothering Sunday 22nd March 2020 in view of the dangers of SARS-CoV-2 transmission. The Prime Minister ordered the country into lockdown on 23rd March.

Eventually we were allowed to return to public worship from 4th July 2020, but the strict social-distancing rules meant that we could only accommodate about 30 people in the Parish Church and a similar number in the Church Centre hall. During this time we held a service in the Parish Church at 9.15am on a weekly basis, and once or twice a month we ran what we called a 'Table Top' service in the Church Centre which allowed us to sit people in their bubbles around tables. Further periods of lockdown followed, but whenever we could, we continued with this pattern of worship, along with some outdoor services. We were grateful to God for the provision of our two buildings which allowed us to involve people in public worship. During this time, remarkably, some people joined the church.

On 19th July 2021 all of the legal Covid restrictions were lifted, although there remained apprehension among many about large gatherings and virus transmission. This seemed to be the right time to put the 2019 PCM resolution into action, and so following the summer

holiday we continued the pattern of services which had been established, but now on a weekly basis. We also included the provision of a meeting time between the two services at 10.25.

The ‘Recovery Rate’ – Aldridge & Nationwide

It is worth reviewing developments in Aldridge in the light of the Church of England Report published in March 2023 with the somewhat dull title *Church Attendance in October 2022: Post-Covid-19 Trends, Patterns and Possibilities*.³

This report notes that larger churches have found it the hardest to ‘recover’ from Covid (at least in terms of numbers of people in church on Sundays), and that many churches have had a “*More rapid than usual turnover of congregation even if overall numbers are similar: Churches have lost – and gained – more individuals than usual.*” (Page 6).

This has been our experience at APC, and the fact that it is also the national picture for larger churches would suggest that caution should be exercised in attributing this phenomenon to purely local factors (such as the change to two Sunday morning services).

Comparison of the situation at APC with the national picture offers some challenges and encouragements. The report calculates a ‘recovery’ rate, defined as the 2022 attendance levels as a proportion of the 2019 attendance levels, expressed as a percentage. The national figure is 79% for adults and 71% for children (the national figures for 2023 have not yet been published). The “recovery” figures for APC, calculated on “average Sunday attendance” between September 2021 and March 2024 are 92.7% for adults and 68% for children. When only the first quarter of 2024 numbers are considered, these proportions rise slightly to 93.8% for adults and 75.7% for children.⁴

The Report contains some advice for churches in this post-Covid era. The top four items of this advice are:

1. Focus on invitation and welcome.
2. Plant new services and congregations.

³ The report is available here: <https://aldridgeparish.org.uk/resources/documents/2024-03-16-71747987.pdf>

⁴ Those who like graphs and statistics might enjoy looking at pages 11 to 15 of our ‘PCM Away Day Pack’ which is available online for anyone to consult: <https://aldridgeparish.org.uk/resources/documents/2024-03-16-60142484.pdf>

3. Make church and services available every week.
4. Focus on children and families.

Acknowledging Grief

The responses to our recent APC Questionnaire⁵ revealed that whilst many in our church are entirely happy with the current arrangements for our Sunday services, there are others who are in grief over the loss of our previous pattern of having one service on Sunday mornings in the Parish Church. A handful of responses requested that we return to that pattern, with others suggesting that we should hold more ‘joint’ services.

I acknowledge that sense of loss entirely. It was lovely to have everyone together in church on Easter Day, and I would personally prefer for many reasons to have just one service on a Sunday morning. I fully understand how some people are feeling about it. We talked about this on our PCM Away Day and weighed various options, attempting to differentiate between our own personal preferences and what was best for the mission of the church.⁶

It is probably worth reiterating that there are no ‘rules’ about which of the services people should go to. The 1025 Centre Church service is not a ‘family service’ even though it is currently the service in which there is provision of groups for children. Plenty of people come to it without children or grandchildren, and everyone is welcome. Similarly there are younger people who regularly come to the 0915 service. Some people vary which service they come to week by week depending on what is going on for them on a particular Sunday. Some people sometimes come to both. You are welcome, whatever free choice you make.

As we have been studying Hebrews on Sundays I have been reminded again of the truth of Chapter 10 verse 25 – that a primary purpose of meeting together is so that we may encourage others (rather expecting the gathering to satisfy all of my own preferences).

Looking Forward

Nothing is ever set in stone, and if the situation changes materially then we must always be open to further review. However with us running at a 93.8% recovery rate in terms of adult

⁵ Jon Morley has produced a summary of the responses to the questionnaire which is available here: <https://alldridgeparish.org.uk/resources/documents/2024-03-16-05960815.pdf>

⁶ If you want to try this exercise yourself, you can find the relevant pages in the PCM Away Day Pack, pages 18 and 19: <https://alldridgeparish.org.uk/resources/documents/2024-03-16-60142484.pdf>

numbers, and the need to focus on mission to children and families as set out in the Church of England Report discussed above, the factors which led to the PCM's decision back in 2019 to move to two morning services still pertain.

Recognizing the need to draw the congregations together in some way, Rachel and Pauline have been doing an amazing job at getting some social events going, and we will continue to work on these and to promote them to all members of the church. Also, without wanting to disrupt the pattern of services too often,⁷ we will seek occasions on which we can invite everyone to join in Sunday worship together. In the diary at the moment are Pentecost, Harvest, Christmas, and next Easter.

We are very blessed to have our two amazing buildings, and as the Sunday services we hold in each of them develop their own characters and styles I believe we have a tremendous opportunity to reach out to our community to join us in worship of the gracious God of the universe who has been made known to us in our Lord Jesus Christ. There remains some 'snagging' still to do – I appreciate that – and we will continue to review the services to ensure that they are reaching out and building up.

Steve Doel

1st May 2024

⁷ Please see the Church of England Report referenced above, which considers the missional drawbacks of varying the pattern of worship too often (page 12).

APPENDIX

Proposal: To plant a second Sunday morning congregation in the Church Centre [September 2019]

Objectives

- (1) To increase capacity in our provision for corporate worship on a Sunday morning.
- (2) To improve our outreach to our local community, particularly to those with young children.
- (3) To mobilize a new generation of leaders.
- (4) To meet the need which exists to offer some diversity in worship style.

Justification

1. We have reached a “ceiling” in our 10am Sunday service because by and large the church is full.¹ Alice Mann argues that the ceiling is reached when 80% of the “desirable” seats are regularly filled (Alice Mann, *Raising the Roof*, 2001, Alban Institute pp20-21)² This is where comfortable capacity is measured at 30-36 inches per person. We are at 80% of **uncomfortable** capacity on average. As well as giving the impression to newcomers that there is no space for them, this also means that we are forced to relegate baptisms and thanksgivings to private lunch-time ceremonies. As noted by the Young Adults Work Group³ this is a distinct missional drawback.

2. Our Split-Site model, with the “main” service taking place in the Parish Church, and the groups for the children and young people taking place in the Church Centre, is not ideal. First, parents of very young children are understandably reluctant to leave them at the Church Centre and to return to the Parish Church. This can lead to a sense of “exile” from the church community. It would be much more welcoming and much more accessible if we were able to offer the children’s groups on the same site as the church gathering. There is plenty of space

¹ This assertion is based on the figures recorded on the seven Sundays from 2nd June to 14th July 2019 inclusive (numbers have been lower over the summer as normal for the season). On these seven Sundays the proportion of the available seats filled ranged from 71% to 97% with a mean of 80%. This includes chairs which arguably should not be set out because e.g. they block the noticeboards, would cause a hazard in the event of an emergency exit, restrict access to large print bibles etc.

²

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=S4KXAwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=alice+munn+raising+the+roof&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwim2tLjLzkAhWTQhUIHdM5A8MQ6AEIKjAA#v=onepage&q=alice%20mann%20raising%20the%20roof&f=false>

³ Young Adults Work Group Report 4th October 2018, point (m)

in the Church Centre for this, and if we begin to exceed capacity we can approach the school, which is effectively on the same campus, for use of space for the older groups.

Second, safeguarding would be improved if we offer provision for children on the same site as provision for their parents.

Third, there are many activities which take place in the Church Centre during the week, and it there would be much less daunting for people to join us in worship on Sunday in a building they know than in a building they don't.

3. There is a need at APC to mobilize a new generation of leaders. Whilst we could work on this within our existing framework, planting a new congregation would offer the opportunity to do this much more readily. Younger generations could be given a stake and a role in forming the new congregation and its culture from the outset.

4. I believe it would assist many of us in our discipleship if we were able to offer some diversity in worship style on a Sunday morning. What we currently offer is what Bob Jackson describes as a "compromise event" (Bob Jackson, *The Road to Growth*, 2005, Church House Publishing, p60) but with a significant number of people not really feeling that it is a compromise at all.

The Way Forward

I would like the PCM to approve the proposal to plant a second Sunday morning congregation, with a commitment to running it for one year, with a thoroughgoing review at the end of the period.

If the PCM is minded to approve the proposal, the next steps are:

- (1) To announce the intention to the congregation.
- (2) To consult the congregation about what would best help them in their Christian discipleship in terms of what our Sunday meetings/services comprise. This will help shape what happens both at the Parish Church and at the Church Centre.
- (3) To consult various stakeholders (leaders of children's groups / young people's groups; service leaders and preachers; musicians; welcome team etc) to help work through practicalities and form a more detailed vision.
- (4) To establish a steering group for the new congregation. There may also be value in doing the same for the congregation which will meet in the Parish Church.

Steve Doel

6th September 2019

A vote was taken on the proposal on 9th September 2019 : 19 in favour, none against, 1 abstention.