

As others see us

O wad some Power the giftie gie us. To see oursels as ithers see us! (Robert Burns)

Discovering what people know about their local churches

SUE RODD REPORTS ON HER RESEARCH IN A WILTSHIRE VILLAGE

How it all started

The village where I live has a population of just over 1800, including both long-term “locals” and incomers (from young families to the retired). There are some businesses in the village, but most of those in employment commute to work elsewhere. Community spirit is particularly strong.

In 1991, the Anglican and Methodist Churches, with some individual Roman Catholics and others, signed a Covenant (not a full LEP) to work and worship together. In 2003 an informal ecumenical “outreach” group started meeting, but by 2007 the two Church Councils were wondering what to do next.

A small group, later called the ACCORD Group, was tasked with trying to find how we could worship together more often and more effectively. However, it quickly became clear that trying to organise shared worship can actually be very divisive. People have their own preferred ways of worshipping – even within each church – and they mostly simply stay away from anything that they fear may make them uncomfortable. By contrast, they are mostly very happy to *work* together; for instance, every year we have a joint church fete, in which the whole village participates, and there are many other shared activities.

So the ACCORD Group decided to work towards fostering a feeling of shared Christian *community*, in the hope that this would help people to WANT to worship together, and therefore to be more open and flexible about their ways of worship.

The need to ask questions

The Group soon realised that we needed better information, and that we needed to talk to people outside the core church community about their perceptions of the mission and ministry of the churches in the village.

We needed to know:

- how aware people are of what we are already doing,
- whether they believe that the shared activities of the churches add value to the life of the community, and
- whether they think that we are doing things well.

We also needed to know what they think the role of the churches actually *is* in the community, and to find out if there are other things that they think we should be doing, or things we should even stop doing together.

It was agreed that I should go out and ask those questions on behalf of the Group, and write it up as the dissertation for my course at theological college. This report summarises what I found.

How we set about the task

A LIST OF ACTIVITIES: With help from others, the ACCORD group compiled a list of all the things that the churches do together. Fifty three activities were listed, specifically excluding denominational worship and other activities undertaken *within* one or other church.

We also did a rough ranking of the activities that group members thought most important, and divided them up into four categories:

- “community” activities like the fete or “welcome packs” for newcomers,
- activities to do directly with families, children and young people,
- groups and courses, and finally
- prayer and worship.

A QUESTIONNAIRE: The ACCORD Group then helped to pilot a questionnaire. We had three sorts of questions:

1. Demographic questions about the respondents, such as: age, gender, church affiliations and church attendance,
2. Lists of activities in these four categories, asking participants to rate:
 - their own awareness of and participation in each activity,
 - whether the activity contributed to the life of the village,
 - how effectively the activity was carried out,
3. Open-ended questions about:
 - the perceived role (if any?) of the churches in the village,
 - things currently done together that would be better done separately,
 - what else we could or should be doing.

Willing volunteers distributed over 200 questionnaires (about eight each), and collected the completed forms. We put forms in the churches, the Post Office and the Library, and on the village website as well, but almost all the replies came as the result of a personal approach.

The results

THE RESPONSES: In response, we had 144 replies (10% of the target age group). In comparison with the 2001 official census figures for the village, we

had replies from a lot of older people and not enough young ones, and from twice as many women as men. The profile of those who responded does, however, fit national church profiles, which are definitely weighted towards females at the older end of the age range. However, the “church attendance” information showed very clearly that we were indeed largely talking to people outside the main church communities. So, despite fewer responses from teenagers and young parents, the answers are still very useful, *provided that* we bear the age bias in mind.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS: The results for how people described their religious affiliations tallied very closely with the 2001 census figures for the village.

- 111 out of 144 (three-quarters) included at least one of a number of possible “Christian” indicators in their response.
- Of these, 79 expressly labelled themselves “Christian”.
- And of these, 47 – a full third of all respondents, the largest single group – declined to link themselves to any particular denomination.
- Of those who stated a denominational allegiance, 40 put Anglican, 10 put Methodist and 6 recorded other denominations.
- Only 22 recorded their denomination without also ticking “Christian” – and of these 16 were Anglican.
- 23 people marked themselves as “spiritual but not religious”, including 11 who also ticked one of the “Christian” indicators.
- 14 declared that they had no religion.
- No one reported another faith.

THREE COMMENTS: The preference for just calling oneself “Christian” may reflect a growing move away from deeply embedded denominational identities.

The category, “Spiritual but not religious” seems to have offered a compromise to agnostics. Additional comments written on the forms

indicated that for many it meant “non-practising”. People do seem increasingly to distinguish between “spirituality” and “religion”.

Clearly, although these percentages correspond well to the census figures for this particular village, they would not be typical of the wider “multi-cultural” Britain.

LOCAL AWARENESS: It’s very clear that most people just don’t know what is going on in the churches – that message came out over and over again. We gave people a list of all the “community activities” and invited them to tick boxes according to whether they were

- actively involved in the activity,
- attending or benefiting from the activity,
- aware of the activity, or
- unaware of the activity.

The graphs are too complex to print here, but the results are stark: Across the range of activities, awareness (including both levels of participation) gradually went down from 98% for the church fete to around 70% for coffee mornings, but then quickly dropped away to 30% for street wardens and less than 10% for the least-known activity. The great majority of respondents were completely unaware of almost half of what the churches were doing within the wider community!

There are equivalent graphs for the children’s work, groups and worship activities. Awareness levels in these three areas are even lower.

SO WHAT DOES THIS IMPLY? We can be defensive about this, and accuse people of not listening, but it seems clear that a lot of the time inside our churches we just talk to each other, and assume that everyone else knows what is on offer.

It's all very well putting notices in the pewsheet, but non-churchgoers just don't see these. And even churchgoers who aren't in church on a particular week won't know either, unless we tell them in some other way.

We live in a consumer society, and therefore we have to face up to the fact that we need to communicate better – both within and outside the churches. Somehow we have to find ways of getting the message “out there”. For instance, we're only beginning to scratch the surface of electronic means of communicating.

LOCAL APPROVAL: Those responding to the questionnaire were then asked two other questions about the same list of community activities:

1. Does the activity add to village life?
2. Is it done well?

The number registering “disapproval”, or claiming that the work was not well done, was tiny; but this shouldn't deceive us into a false complacency. The huge number of those who were “undecided” – many more than those who had previously indicated that they were “unaware” of a particular activity – suggests that either they know very little about most of the activities, or they don't care. The number of those whose response to the second question was “well done” was also soberingly small!

Before the questionnaire was produced, the list of activities had been tested on some “focus groups” and the list was presented on the form roughly in line with the attention paid to them in these groups. However, the grading – a rough and ready indicator of the presumed “importance” of each activity – proved to be considerably at odds with what the respondents saw as their priorities.

In fact there was a remarkable similarity in how the respondents assessed the various activities in terms of their *awareness*, their *approval*, and whether they saw them as *benefiting the village*. For example:

- The respondents rated the provision of facilities and use of the church buildings for a wide range of activities *well above average* in importance, whereas the focus groups thought it the least important.
- Conversely, the street stewards were third from the top on the questionnaire, but third from the bottom in the responses (although see further comments below).

SO WHAT DOES THIS IMPLY? These disparities give considerable food for thought – for instance, ought we to consider making our buildings more flexible and comfortable, and share them more widely to meet this clearly expressed need? Also, do these comparisons reveal where we should focus our limited resources if we have to choose between two different activities? The listening required here is the flip side of the need to provide information, referred to above.

THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS: More encouragingly, in the responses to the open-ended questions, everyone agreed that the churches have a role to play in the village, even if only “for those who want it”. Words like “heart” and “focus” were used a lot.

So *antagonism* doesn’t appear to be a major problem (at least in this particular village), though *apathy* certainly is.

There were also very few suggestions that we ought to do *fewer* things together; topics raised in this regard were mainly related to dogma, worship or church organisation, and really seemed to be of concern only to those heavily involved. Again, this seems to suggest that people are generally less concerned about denominational boundaries than “insiders” might be.

Five key emerging priorities

1. THE CHURCHES SHOULD BE A FOCAL POINT THAT HOLDS THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER IN AN OPEN AND WELCOMING WAY.

This includes things like the festivals and the related services, as well as Remembrance Sunday, Harvest and other community events – and not forgetting funerals, weddings and baptisms. There is a strong element of “folk religion” here that we can draw on, and the provision of facilities to others is seen as *extremely* important.

As a major public response, the churches are planning to provide lunch for the village to celebrate the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee. Such generosity, however, may need to go deeper – for example, the parish church is the single biggest enclosed space in the village, but at present the layout, heating and nave furnishings place severe restrictions on how it can be used.

2. THE MAIN WAY OF EXPRESSING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY SHOULD BE THROUGH PASTORAL CARE AND CONCERN FOR THOSE IN NEED.

Some respondents expressed this quite negatively, interpreting “being religious” as implying nothing more than presence in a particular building on a Sunday, and suggesting that loving care for one’s neighbour would be a much better expression of Christian principles.

So there is teaching to be done – both within and outside the congregations – on how “services” can and should both lead to and underpin “service”.

These comments, too, reflect the worrying communication/perceptual gap highlighted earlier. For example, as noted above, the focus groups ranked “Street stewards” very highly – being aimed at providing exactly the community concern that is being asked for here. But no-one outside the churches appears to know what a “street steward” *is*, never mind what they might do!

This is another area that we are already following up. We have renamed the street stewards “community contacts”, and are re-organising the whole system more efficiently so that we can care for our community better (and indeed be seen to be doing so). These changes are vital, as the County

Council is sponsoring a scheme under which a “Good Neighbour Co-ordinator” has recently been appointed. Whatever the churches are able to do must tie in with schemes like this to make best use of resources.

3. THE CHURCHES ARE IMPORTANT FOR WORSHIP, BUILDING UP FAITH, AND PROVIDING A “SAFE PLACE” FOR MEDITATION AND QUIET.

People are clearly hungry for spiritual resources; sadly, however, many don’t see the churches as the place to find them.

The responses highlighted predictable disagreements over traditional vs. modern worship – no surprises there! It’s the classic dilemma of a village church that everyone expects to find the kind of worship or spirituality they need. But perhaps this is where having two sets of resources, Anglican and Methodist, gives us strength – *provided that* we are seen to be working together!

4. TEACHING CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES IS IMPORTANT.

This conviction went together with a widespread concern that much, much more needs to be done for the young (although offers of help were notably absent). Again, we are trying to do more about this – Messy Church is one example, as well as ever-increasing involvement in the local (church) school.

5. SHARING FAITH AND SPREADING THE GOSPEL IN A UNITED CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IS ALSO VITAL.

Without doubt, the more we can be seen to be working together the better. This also brings us full circle – back to the original aims of promoting united worship that can underpin shared ministry and service in the community.

A Vision for the Body of Christ

Few of the respondents would use this language but, on the basis of what they told us, it can be argued that the churches are ***catalysts for the transformation of the whole community into the Body of Christ.***

The churches, united in their covenant relationship, need to be the beating **heart** of the community, providing both spiritual and social capital; and as a body, they need to stay **young at heart**, so that people of all ages and spiritual maturity can find a spiritual home.

The body needs a viable system of **spiritual arteries and veins** to carry food and oxygen out to every part of the body, and also to deal with “waste products” such as hurt and damage, as we care for others.

To fulfil its caring role, the body needs a strong central **skeleton** to support and structure the developing **muscles and organs**.

The body also needs strong **tendons and ligaments**, so that all the individual components will be aware that they are part of the same body, even if their involvement, needs and worship may be very different.

To maintain a healthy body, do we also perhaps need a **fitness drive** that cuts down the flab?

All this, of course, presupposes good information – as provided in the body by a healthy **nervous system** – carrying messages outwards and between different organs, but also inwards from our senses and from places of pain. This means that we need not only to talk, but also to listen, to God and to one another.

Finally, of course, none of this is of any use at all if the body ceases to breathe! Without the **breath** of the Holy Spirit, the fittest, strongest church body on earth will be lifeless and of no use to anyone.

Conclusion

The churches in my village have been greatly encouraged by this research exercise. They have learned that the opposite of unity is not diversity but discord. So we have every reason to celebrate our unified diversity!

Many have been surprised to learn how much is already happening; and there is also now a much clearer shared understanding of the task ahead.

The ongoing work of listening to our community, however, has only just begun!

A footnote

The image of the body applies to individual churches as much as it does to the ecumenical activities studied here. The activities described and analysed in this project happen to be ecumenical in this particular instance, but most would have an equivalent in any church setup.

Thus, if a similar listening exercise were mounted in other contexts, the detailed results might not be the same; but the general principles would apply and the broad outline of the conclusions might not be very different.

We have learned that effective communication is a two-way process, and that without it the body – Christ’s Body – will struggle to stay alive.

The Revd Sue Rodd is an NSM Curate in her Wiltshire village and a founder member of the local churches’ ecumenical “ACCORD” Working Group. She conducted her research in 2010 as part of an MA dissertation project at Ripon College, Cuddesdon. The full text of the dissertation, including the questionnaire, can be found at www.whittonteam.org.uk.

Questions for every local church

- Are we as church people aware of just how many activities are being undertaken in and by our churches (and by whom)?
- How can we make people – both inside and outside our congregations – more aware of what is already on offer or possible?
- What is our overall picture of what we are trying to achieve? Have things just grown up haphazardly over the years?
- How best can we listen to what comes next – in order to fulfil God’s plans and meet the needs of others?

Looking at each activity in turn:

- In light of God’s purposes, is this (actual or proposed) activity something the churches actually *ought* to be doing? Which aspects of the “Body of Christ” is it aimed at building up?
- Is it practicable for us to resource this activity and to do it well? Is God calling someone else to share the responsibility?
- Alternatively, to what extent is it already being done by others? If so, how can we help them to do it better – and not try to compete? What can we contribute, either individually or corporately?
- Or is it time we re-focused on something else, accepting that good ideas sometimes have a given life-span, in order to make best use of the resources that God has given us?
- What exciting opportunities could that make space for?