

## The Church Building in Use – The Vision

So often, in church-related discussion, we hear - 'it's not the *building* that's important' – it's what *we* do as the people of God that matters - and of course that's true, but in the Anglican church, and in this community, much of what we do centres around the building, and that's what other members of the community are used to, and expect. So although it's far from the only way, the church building can play a big part in what brings people to God. How we *use* the building, then, is critical.

The project team has spent some time contemplating the project aims and turning them into an imaginative vision. You may have seen the large information leaflet. The section called 'the vision' begins: 'a building alive with activity, available for all members of the community, who are frequently in and out for many reasons'. We believe that it is this *living* building that will help to bring the whole community into a closer relationship with God.

Putting some of the ideas around the vision into words is difficult. We are talking about human beings after all; beliefs, values and opinions differ widely, so what inspires one, as we know, will not inspire another. However, as we're trying to 'catch a vision' this morning, to understand how the changes in the building will positively impact us all, I wondered if a little visualisation may help. So I invite you to join me on a journey of discovery. Perhaps, if you feel comfortable doing so, and especially because we are in a different building, you may like to close your eyes ...

It's a quiet autumn morning in Eynsford, and you have found yourself with some spare time. It's a cold but bright day and a gentle walk seems like a good idea.

As you stroll through the village you realise you are passing St. Martin's and into your mind come snippets of conversations you've heard; people talking enthusiastically about changes to the inside of the building, so you decide to wander in. It's quite a while since you've been in there. You used to make it at Christmas and Easter, but ... well ... life just gets busy doesn't it?

You've missed the lych gate so you follow a new smooth path through the churchyard. The usual church entrance is still there but to the left of it, around the side of the building, you find a *new* entrance. The new entrance is wide and there are no steps to climb.

The door is *open* ... and you walk in. You notice that there's a door to a new toilet on the left. The next door on the left is open and you see mugs and a big teapot. Turning to the right you find yourself at the side of the nave near the back of the church. Wow – yes it has changed. It's still as beautiful as ever. As peaceful as always. But there are no pews. The floor ahead of you is level and open. You turn towards the front where you see comfortable chairs arranged in rows. Your eye is caught by shafts of sunlight and you look up. The chancel looks pretty much the same as you remember, except ... smarter ... and you realise that the whole building has been re-painted. You walk towards the front and glancing over to the right you see that the side chapel looks the same too, except that there are some colourful displays in there, and a quiet area to sit and reflect. As you turn you see new cupboards all along the side chapel's back wall. Perhaps that's why everywhere looks so tidy.

You've been so absorbed in the changes that you haven't realised you're not alone. Small groups of people are sitting around tables at the back of the church, and someone is serving them drinks. She turns to you with a smile and offers you a warm welcome, along with a coffee. You notice a display of books, CDs and other items. They do look interesting. You decide that a sit down with a book and your coffee seems like a very good idea.

As you sit you feel the comfort of the chair. You also realise that you are pleasantly warm. That old so-called heating system must have been replaced too. You are still entranced by the building and for a moment you let your imagination run. You can *suddenly* see all the possibilities – yes, normal church services must be great in here, even more formal, extra special services with all their colour and ceremony. But now the building offers so much more. For *all* services, for baptisms, weddings, funerals, with the extra people they bring, making sure everyone is comfortable must be so much easier. And then, when the services are over, lots of people can be in here for lots more reasons. The chairs can be arranged to accommodate concerts and meetings and exhibitions and all sorts of social events. Drinks and food can be served. No-one is excluded because the access is much easier. And ... it's warm.

Your mind races on – you can see heads bowed in silent prayer, then you can hear lively discussions, next you hear music – first an orchestra, and then your favourite hymn, you can smell candles ... and hot chocolate, you can see children sitting round tables, giggling over something they are making, you can hear their parents chatting,

you can see photographs on display, you can sense the bustle of a fair trade market, you can see young people, their heads together in earnest dialogue, you can see the suffering person and the friend's arm around them, you can see all the faces – some of sorrow, but more of joy ... more than anything you realise you can feel the *life* in the building, and most of all you can see other people like you, finding the door open, walking in to a warm welcome and discovering something special.

Now you think about it, you remember vaguely, reading something about ... an open door ... for everyone ... yes - it's coming back - about the open door to give people a glimpse of heaven, to provide a way into the family of God and to allow the people of the church to share the love of God in the community.

And then - quite suddenly - you understand ... all these things are being helped hugely by the new flexibility and versatility of the building.

You understand the excited conversations you had overheard now – word has obviously spread. More and more people know about it. And *you* had heard. And you came in. It was easy. And inside it's comfortable. The more comfortable people are, the longer they'll stay. These church people obviously knew what they were doing, because the longer people stay, the more comfortable they might get and then through the relationships they form they might really experience something that shows them heaven and draws them to God (... perhaps ... God had something to do with it ??). Thinking about it, you realise that the better meeting space probably means that the people who *already* go to church are benefiting, and *their* relationships are strengthening, equipping them better for their work in the community. Come to think of it, half the community is in the church anyway ... goodness – so much to think about and so much to tell friends ...

You realise your coffee's gone a bit cold, you promise yourself you'll come back and read the book and you get up to leave. As you do so, you see the magnificent oak and glass screen that now separates the vestries from the nave and you are filled with wonder. How did this small community manage this? You don't realise you've spoken aloud, but the man at the next table answers you - "we didn't do it on our own you know" and he gives a friendly laugh. "We trusted in God - in his faithfulness and his promises." You don't need to hear anything else. You are seriously coming back to find out more ...