

Interview with Rev. Dave Clancey on the partnership of St Saviour's and St Nicholas



Rev. Dave Clancey

As Christians we're generally think that people shouldn't live together before they get married. And certainly for Christians we seek to follow our Lord's commands about sexuality and marriage.

However recently in the suburbs of South Christchurch Christians have been co-habiting. Rev Dave Clancey (DC) tells Latimer Focus (LF) the story of the two partners, and how their coming together is serving to advance the gospel.

DC: Before too much concern is generated, I'm talking about the parishes of Sydenham-Beckenham and South West Christchurch partnering together, and the story is one of how these parishes have worked together to see the great news of Jesus spreading.

LF: What brought about the partnership?

DC: Following the earthquakes of 2011, the Diocese of Christchurch recognized that changes in the structure of ministry units was necessary. Population shifts, new housing developments, as well as damage to church buildings all meant that the status quo was impossible to maintain. A Structural Review Group was formed, which produced a series of suggestions of what the Diocese might look like going forward. One of those was that St Saviour's (Sydenham/Beckenham), a larger church, merge with St Nicholas (South West Christchurch) a smaller neighboring church.

LF: Why these two parishes? What was it about them that made a merger viable?

DC: There were a number of things. St Nicholas had, for a number of years, recognized that they were struggling to maintain ministry, and previous vicars had helped the parish consider different options for their future. St Saviour's had been re-formed nearly ten years ago by a group of people coming from St John's Latimer Square to revitalize the parish, so the pattern of working with a neighboring church was well known. St Saviour's was also having to meet in a school hall at the time, and growing numbers meant that location was impractical. A new service was being considered, and the option to support an existing ministry was attractive. Lastly, the parish of South West Christchurch was in between vicars, which allowed a gradual process of that parish getting to know the ministry and clergy of St Saviour's.

LF: Tell us how the process worked.

DC: After the wardens and vestries from both parishes meet a few times, and there being general agreement to explore the possibility of a merger, both churches changed the times of their services (St Saviour's to 10:30am, St Nicholas to 9am). I was then invited to take occasional services at St Nicholas. We also put before the church of St Saviour's the possibility of the merger, and asked people to prayerfully consider whether they would be willing to move to the 9am service. St Saviour's had planned to take on a Priest Assistant in early 2014, and so the nominators of St Nicholas were involved in the appointment of Rev. Chris Spark, for he would minister at both congregations. With all this in place, in early February 2014 about forty people were sent from the 10:30 congregation at St Saviour's to join the 9am congregation at St Nicholas. Practically, the diocesan synod needs to confirm the formal merger of the two parishes, and then we will be one ministry unit.

LF: What have you done to ensure a smooth merger of the two churches?

DC: Other than pray?! I think the key thing has been to not see one church as primary and the other as the second church, but to try and hold both as two different congregations of the one church. We've ensured that the same preaching programme is run at both; that the distinctives of worship at each congregation are maintained, and that we talk of being one church, in two locations with three congregations (we also started an evening service in early 2014). Church lunches, social activities, and ensuring that other ministries (small groups etc) happening at a parish (rather than congregational) level has been key so that all are invited and involved.

LF: What would you do differently if you had your time again?

DC: I don't think it's possible to over-communicate in situations like this, and I think there were times where I didn't say the same thing enough times, both to the congregations and to others involved in the process, (the Bishop, dioceses, archdeacons, etc.). I think I'd provide more opportunities for discussion and review amongst those who were involved.

LF: How has the merger served to advance the gospel?

DC: That's the key, isn't it? We've done this so that the great news of the Lord Jesus might be known more widely. Practically we now have more locations where we can invite people to hear about Christ. We also have greater visibility (for the merger allowed us to move the smaller

10:30 congregation back into the St Saviour's building on Colombo Street) which has resulted in more people just wandering in to our services. I think we've also seen Christians across the congregations grow in their excitement to see the gospel go out, as they have made sacrifices and committed themselves to action so that the gospel might grow and bear fruit in the South of Christchurch.