



St. Michael's Aldershot Growing Faith Foundation Hub

Progress Report – 31/01/2024

Introduction:

In this end-of-year report, we will assess the progress made in line with our theory of change. Our theory of change revolves around reaching Hard-to-Reach Groups (HTRGs) through cross-cultural engagement, equipping the inherited congregation for effective discipleship and faith nurturing, and fostering quality relationships that lead to increased inclusion in the worshipping community. Throughout the year, we have strived to answer key questions that both relate to and validate this theory:

- How do we foster quality relationships in our mission field of the (stakeholders) School Communities, their households, our own congregation, Deanery, Diocese and National Church
- Why would HTRGs come? - Assessing the efficacy of outreach and engagement.
- What is effective discipleship here? - Examining our approach to nurturing faith.
- How are new disciples embedded within the worshipping community, taking responsibility for their discipleship? - Evaluating our efforts to integrate newcomers into our community.

Progress and Activities:

1. Fostering quality relationships amongst our stakeholders:

Throughout the year, we have continued to strengthen our connection with St. Michael's Schools (Infants and Juniors) parents, and children. A fundamental part of this has been a process of listening to the Spirit at work within and amongst the people of our school community and how best to serve and really get to know them. What we heard was:

- School – the Head Teachers welcomed the involvement of the Vicar or ordained clergy as this gave a sense of seriousness, importance and priority; moreover, the presence of the Vicar provided reassurance especially when dealing with spiritual matters or those concerning Christianity; e.g. *hard questions from the children were stored up for the Vicar*. Notably, schools were facing huge strains with low morale and budgetary cuts, we *heard* that the teachers wanted help and support with the work-life balance, so we initiated and employed a Life Coach (starting in January term) as an answer.
- Children, existing congregation, parents – relationships flourished when the children felt that they were listened to, their ideas taken up and implemented, and that they were given

responsibility, e.g. even participating in the Eucharist liturgy or leading intercessions without an adult; the existing inherited congregation were much more enthused as they felt listened to in that what they valued most stylistically and their traditions were not discarded or dismissed but they were invited to get involved in devising and participating in the Service; they have displayed a growing flexibility and openness to new ways of conducting the service. We have successfully maintained the liturgical mystery of the eucharist while incorporating a mix of modern child-friendly songs and traditional hymns; we put on coffee mornings for parents and liaised with the SEN/Home link Team from the school, e.g. doing a joint Christmas Party for the parents; parents wanted a safe space to voice their fears and concerns about their children's wellbeing. We learnt that a substantial percentage of our children are high on the neurodiverse spectrum. By listening, praying with parents and being hospitable, trusting relationships were developing.

2. Why would HRTGs come? - Assessing the efficacy of outreach and engagement.

We have observed that our most successful engagements with the church have occurred when school children actively participate in shaping the monthly FOMO theme, pose questions, and take part in dramatic presentations based on Sunday's readings. Key moments of engagement were witnessed on St. Michael's Day and during the reading about Saul on the road to Damascus. These events attracted children, their parents, and grandparents, who often recorded their child's performance and became more involved with the larger church congregation. However, this has not yet translated into a consistent increase in regular attendance. I suspect (and would need to test this) that (i) the parents don't quite feel they have a big enough stake in the weekly life of church and the pull of competing alternatives as well as time deficiency and economic pressures are much stronger; (ii) we are creatures of habit and the low frequency of Services is not creating that habit of church-going; (iii) the Services are formational in discipleship; and (iv) increasing the number of entry points and access to involvement in worship would lead to increased attendance.

We also use visual stimuli, such as screens and video presentations for readings and songs, to capture the attention of a diverse audience. Another important aspect is how we use language. Much 'Christian-speak' is loaded and may contribute to various misconceptions or misunderstandings about our faith. A lot of attention is paid to demystifying the liturgy and our Faith, signposting and explaining what is going to happen next (this is particularly important for people with strong neurodiversity) and using simple, everyday language.

3. What is effective discipleship here? - Examining our approach to nurturing faith.

It seems that the main barriers to active discipleship are (i) the perception of not having an important enough stake in God's Kingdom; and (ii) the assumption on our part and classification of "not a Christian".

Christian Faith is definitely alive and there – we very rarely, if ever, encounter anyone who is vehemently against Christianity. The one instance was that of a person who was in a process of grief having miscarried. After listening, allowing her expression of pain, and walking alongside her in her bereavement she now attends.

Our discipleship process has as its starting point "God is working in you, he has something to say to help us in our own discipleship, through you...and you may have some fresh insights". Additionally, we use Ephesians as a basis, that the Church reveals the 'wisdom of God', that we can all have and

receive the Holy Spirit and start to live God's vision of a peaceable, flourishing world through intimacy with God and loving each other.

Thus, we use a series of open questions based on a theme for that month in the Services. This theme is also synched across the Schools so that throughout the year we can reinforcing learning. Everyone, children and other generations, are invited to share their insights on the theme. The questions are designed to elicit theological meaning and the immediacy of God's power for transformation. It is facilitating a *learning together culture*. There is a call to action at the end of the time and waiting on the Holy Spirit.

As mentioned above 'formation' is critical. Equally, I would like to test whether there is scope for some sort of Catechism-teaching for the children which could be done in the School. This needs testing.

4. How are new disciples embedded within the worshipping community, taking responsibility for their discipleship? - Evaluating our efforts to integrate newcomers into our community.

Our discipleship funnel involves inviting newcomers/joiners to join one of our homegroups but also to a meal at the Vicarage. The home group does provide a form of embedding. We also have the drop-in Café on Thursday mornings which helps in this area.

Future Plans: In the upcoming months:

- we plan to evaluate the impact of our life coaching programme on teachers.
- create more opportunities for access to worship, formation and discipleship by developing a children's worship band and encouraging children and parents to join our established choir, with a new homegroups via the choir and music.
- We are actively working on employing a lay pioneer who will work both with the school and the church, providing support to 15 targeted families. The job description and legal aspects of this dual role are currently under review, with recruitment expected to commence soon.
- Our Thursday morning Drop-In Café, which has evolved into a support group for mothers of neurodiverse children at our schools, will continue to provide valuable community support.

Conclusion: As we reflect on our efforts and accomplishments throughout the year, we recognize the importance of our theory of change in guiding our initiatives. While we have made progress in engaging with HTRGs and creating an inclusive and flexible worship environment, we acknowledge the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation to ensure that our theory of change continues to be a driving force for positive transformation within our community. We look forward to the coming year with optimism and a commitment to fulfilling our mission. We thank GFF and our Diocese for the continued support we receive.