

**Sermon preached at St Mary's by Vaughan S. Roberts
to introduce the 8 Essential Qualities, 16th Nov. 2014**

Jesus taught his disciples: 'Seek first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Mt 6: 33).

Our diocese is encouraging all churches in Coventry and Warwickshire to explore their ministry with a programme called Natural Church Development (NCD) and the 8 qualities that it's identified for healthy churches. The first stage of this process is to ask a representative sample of those involved in the church (ideally around 30 people) to fill out a questionnaire about life at St Mary's. That sample group will meet after this morning's 10.30am service to complete the surveys. Apologies if you've not been invited this time round but there will be further surveys and others will be needed to help in the future. As the NCD material makes clear, this is intended to be 'snapshot' of where we are now as a church.

Before I say a bit more about the 8 qualities of a healthy church, let me ask you to call to mind a 'leader'. It might be someone you've worked for or who's led a voluntary organisation that you've been involved with. Alternatively, it might be someone you've observed through the media – someone's who's achieved great things in sport (Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United is often cited) or in culture (Neil MacGregor and his leadership of the British Museum might be an example) or a politician (Sir Winston Churchill clearly comes to mind). Then again, it might be someone whose life-story of leadership has been inspiring and you've learnt more about this person through biography, their own autobiography or historical research that's provided insight into their gifts and personality.

As we bring to mind these people can you recall what language they used or what language has been used about them? Were they praised for their high moral character? Alternatively, for their skill at growing people or an organisation? Perhaps they were noted for their ability to make people feel important or their capacity to give a clear sense of direction? Or for their ability to work in an almost super-human way? Two writers on management and leadership, Mats Alvesson and Andre Spicer (*Metaphors We Lead By*, Routledge, 2011) have explored how the language and images of leadership shape all kinds of organisations in our culture. The five popular metaphors they identify (relating to those five characteristics, I've just mentioned) are: saint, gardener, friend, commander and superhero or cyborg. And what they highlight is that the organisational language of management and leadership is not neutral. So the kind of organisation or group that uses images of gardening and growth is likely to be very different to that which uses the language of the superhuman or cyborg.

Of course we can see something similar in how such language is used in scripture. In John chapter 15 we hear Jesus say: *I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower*. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 Paul presents an extended reflection on how the Church is *the Body of Christ*. Earlier in chapter 3 he uses a building image to describe the Church in terms of *foundations* and Jesus does something similar in Matthew 7 when he speaks of the wise and foolish builders constructing their houses on rock and sand. It's not that one analogy is right and another wrong or even that one is better than the other. Instead, we need to look at whether the language being using is appropriate for the time and the place; and most importantly what's the underlying message that's being communicated in

the terms and images being used. It's worth keeping that in mind as we explore what the NCD programme is asking of us in reflecting upon the ministry of our church.

The ideas outlined by Natural Church Development (and from the outset we should be sensitive to that language) have arisen from research by a German pastor, Christian Schwartz, into what characteristics are shared by healthy churches. The eight qualities that his work identifies are listed in our newsletter: a) Empowering leadership; b) Gift-orientated ministry; c) Passionate spirituality; d) Effective structures; e) Inspiring worship; f) Holistic small groups; g) Need-orientated outreach; and h) Loving relationships.

One of the dangers here is that we can get caught on the adjectives and miss the nouns, e.g. we would all agree that worship is important in a church but *what* kind of worship is 'inspiring'? For some it'll involve choral music, some'll need worship songs, whilst others just seek silence and some may want a combination of all of these and more? As we reflect on these 8 characteristics, we should hold onto each of the nouns and remember the descriptor is negotiable.

Finally, having looked at the language and the content, let's look at the process. Now, those who've been involved with any organisation for sometime will know that what goes around, comes around – in teaching, business, health, banking, and yes ... the Church. What we stopped doing 10 years ago, suddenly comes back into fashion so why change when it'll all come back in due course. The bottom line here is: why bother?

Paradoxically, the Natural Church Development programme isn't necessarily about change, rather it's about asking whether we can do things better. Speaking personally, I admit to having reservations. For instance, I've doubts about the claim that these principles work for all churches, everywhere, at all times. In my experience, one size doesn't usually fit all. So, *why* then, should *we* engage?

First, there's a healthy degree of honesty in that the programme doesn't claim to be a silver bullet which will solve all our problems. That's good and realistic. Second, it is a tool for us to use in assessing where we are and what we might need to improve. That's also very helpful, especially as we need to look seriously at having a stewardship campaign in the next 18 months. We have these about every 5 years and if we're asking people to fund the ministry of St Mary's, then all of us need to have confidence that what we're funding is in good *health* and what we *need*. And third (which brings us back to the beginning and again speaking personally) I like the NCD language which speaks about quality rather than *quantity*.

The eight characteristics are less about numbers and measurement and more about worth and value. Such things are more intangible but no less important for that. Not everything that the programme asks us to focus on will be immediately applicable to St Mary's e.g. we'll need to think carefully about how a category such as 'Holistic small groups' might apply to a civic ministry such as ours.

But this tool is being offered to us in order that we can look at ourselves ... St Mary's and our shared ministry ... to the end that we might: *Seek first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, [so that] all these things will be given as well.*