

**Sermon preached at St Mary's by Vaughan S. Roberts  
on the results of the 8 Essential Qualities survey, 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb. 2015**

Last November St Mary's began the process of engaging with the Diocesan initiative of the eight essential qualities for a healthy church – the 8EQs for short. A representative group of 30 people from our various congregations was approached to fill out the 8EQs survey and I preached an introductory sermon that looked at three things: (i) the significance of the images and language used in such analyses; (ii) the 8 qualities themselves; and (iii) how the process works. And that sermon is still available online from the St Mary's website.

Just before Christmas we received the results back from the questionnaires and the church council's standing committee, which is overseeing this process, discussed how best to take things forward. Rightly or wrongly our perception is that St Mary's works best as a 'bottom-up' church rather than a 'top-down' body, so we felt it was important to get as wide an input as possible into the next stage and that's where the first four Sundays of Lent come in. This morning and over the next three Sunday mornings we'll be looking at the survey results and asking for your thoughts about where they leave us and for your ideas about how to take things forward. The plan is to make these sermons available online and in printed format, so if some people miss a Sunday they can still catch up and offer their reflections.

To this effect, there are pieces of card available and you're invited to write your thoughts down on them and hand them in either on the collection plate, or to the vicar afterwards or to the church office during the week. You can put your name on them or hand them in anonymously. We plan to collate these responses for the congregational meeting and lunch on 19<sup>th</sup> April here in church to which everyone is invited.

So what does the survey reveal about St Mary's? We have handed out a two-page, summary guide this morning and I'll speak more about that in a moment but the first thing to say is: we must keep in mind this is only a *snapshot* of St Mary's ministry. That means it's not a detailed analysis of every aspect of this church's life – instead it's a broad overview which focuses on those aspects that the eight essential qualities are interested in. And it's located in a moment of time, so even since November things will have changed and developed. Nevertheless, it's helpful to see what's revealed.

So let's look at the summary guide, taking the bar-chart first. Of the 8EQs which were analysed we can see – as we move from left to right – that the survey suggests we're *very* strong on using people's gifts; we're strong on our worship, structures, leadership, small groups and our relationships. And it's worth taking time to rejoice in those positives. Perhaps not everyone will share in *all* of that experience and these outcomes certainly shouldn't make us complacent but they clearly provide some very encouraging and solid foundations to build on for the future.

Another other way of showing those results is the circular diagram on the other side of the bar-charts. The outer ring identifies each of the 8EQs. The dots plot where we are in terms of our average score and, as we'd expect from the bar-chart, there are two dots which dip under our average. In other words, the survey is saying that we're a healthy church but can we improve on that health in two areas. And the questionnaire results suggest that we need to address the two qualities of: passionate spirituality and need-orientated evangelism. It's worth reminding ourselves of something that I observed back

in November which is that the *nouns* are more important than the *adjectives* – we should hold onto the categories but sit more lightly to any modifiers.

Now, before saying more about those two specific qualities that we need to address, it would be helpful to look in more detail at the processes here. This may not be the most exciting thing you'll hear today (!) but we can't understand our journey if we're not aware of the route, so please bear with me.

There are six stages to the 8EQ cycle. These are: a) Testing; b) Understanding; c) Planning; d) Doing; e) Experiencing; f) Perceiving. The survey itself was the Testing stage and these four Sundays and our congregational lunch are the Understanding and Planning stages. So we need to decide *together* what to do, do it and then finally review how it's all gone. Then the cycle repeats.

With this pattern, we'll be invited to address other areas for development in the future, so we don't have to put everything right all in one go which is why we're invited to attend to the greatest need first. And in our case that's the issue of passionate spirituality. This is where the image of the barrel comes in. As we can see, the striking aspect of that image is that the shortest stave determines how much the barrel can hold and that's why we're invited to attend to the weakest *first*.

We should bear in mind that it's not *uncommon* for passionate spirituality to be the lowest of the 8EQs in Anglican churches and it's frequently rated the most in need of attention amongst the churches in our diocese. So what is 'passionate spirituality'? Two key components in this category are personal prayer and bible reading, and we'll explore each of those in turn over the next two Sundays.

In conclusion then, where does this survey of the eight essential qualities for a healthy church leave us at St Mary's? There are two key outcomes: first, we are a *healthy* church and there's much to give thanks to God for; and second, we do have some areas of ministry which need developing and we'll be looking at those in the weeks to come.

Finally let me suggest three questions we might like to reflect upon at this stage. These could frame our responses for our cards but, equally, you may wish to address something else that's occurred in your mind and that's perfectly fine. Three closing questions then:

- (i) What do we make of the process: of looking at St Mary's ministry in this way; of seeking improvements and then reviewing what we've achieved?
- (ii) What do we make of the survey results: from your experience are they a fair reflection of the life and ministry of this church, or has something been missed out or obscured?
- (iii) What do we make of the barrel analogy, which is fundamental to the 8EQ process: is that a helpful way to proceed?

Do let us have *your* thoughts because they're going to be *vital* to framing how we respond to these ideas and this initiative.