

Difficult questions and a call to action

I am mindful that in my first letter I said that it was essential for us to get our local finances in order before we look too much to help others. However, we should also reflect on our own position as one of considerable good fortune. Unlike other parishes, we have the support of the King Henry VIII Endowed Trust and I have already explained how far that support goes in covering our day to day costs.

The more I have understood about our finances over the past two and a half years, the more I find myself raising uncomfortable questions to which I have no easy answer.

Have we as a congregation become complacent as a result of that support we receive?

Is our individual level of giving in line with those of other parishes in our Diocese and in line with other parishes across the country with similar demographics? I am seeking clarification on this with our Diocesan Board of Finance, but at the time of writing I have not received a response.

Personally, I have a level of discomfort knowing that we do not pay for our clergy posts from regular income while other parishes do. They can afford that and still contribute to the Support Fund in addition.

What makes St Mary's so different?

As I have discussed in a previous letter, our building is certainly of huge historical importance and we have a responsibility to maintain it so it will always be a constant drain on our resources. However, we are not the only parish in that position and for the past two years we have had the capital campaign resources to pay all our major fabric bills. In spite of that we are unable to make ends meet.

Are we really maximising the potential income?

We are looking at how we promote St Mary's to a wider audience and we have funds allocated in 2016 to help us revamp our website and raise public awareness of our fine church and our ministry. We would like to bring more visitors into the church and encourage them to give financially in support of our work.

The current average level of giving per visitor is less than £1. That statistic alone gives rise to the question that was asked at our recent Annual Meeting. Should we be charging an admission fee for visitors to come into St Mary's? Would this increase our income, or would it actually reduce the number of visitors and see us turning people from our door? Would it change the nature of our relationship with the local community?

Could we encourage more organisations to use the building and charge them a letting fee? One of the challenges of a historical building such as St Mary's is that it is not well equipped with facilities to support major events. Would we have to and would we be able to invest in new facilities?

What should we stop doing?

As you will have seen from my budget letter, our expenditure is considerable and diverse. Reducing expenditure means ceasing some of our activity.

Should we stay closed during the week? Should we trim the number of staff? None of these things sit comfortably with me, but the questions need to be asked so that as a congregation we all affirm that we are committed to the things we do and are prepared to support them.

How much should I give?

This is an important question, but one which has a different answer for each of us. For some people a donation of over £1000 per year (about £83 per month) is easily made. For others £20 per month is sacrificial. Both are equally welcome. Dangerous territory for me to enter, but perhaps a useful comparison is to consider how much we spend on other things and how we value their importance.

Do we spend £35 per month on a phone without a second thought but hesitate to give the same amount to God? If we do the calculations, £35 per month is £420 per year. With Gift Aid added this is worth £525. What about our allowance for eating out, or buying that coffee while in town? Sacrificing one cup of coffee a week could mean an extra £120 before Gift Aid.

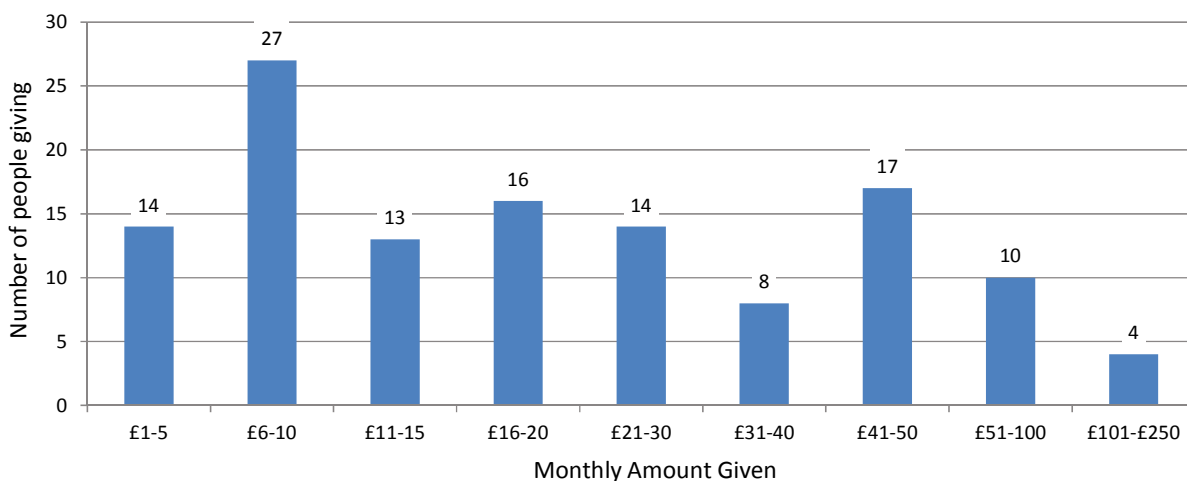
How does my giving compare to others?

Everyone's circumstances are different and the decision as to what to give has to be a personal one. I hope that these letters have given you sufficient background to help with that decision, but also thought it might be useful to summarise the current level of congregational giving.

We currently have around 60 members of the congregation who give regularly using the envelope scheme, and roughly the same number who give by standing order. As treasurer I will take this opportunity to encourage all regular givers to give by standing order if at all possible.

Envelopes generate a lot of manual work for our money-counters and our Parish Office and there are very few regular givers who give the same amount for each of the 52 weeks in a year. A standing order allows me to plan finances with a committed level of income and minimum administration.

I am including simple profile of the combined giving across standing orders and envelopes. I have grouped givers into bands by monthly level of giving. The height (and the number at the top) of each bar is the number of people who fall into that band.



Our Stewardship Campaign is now under way and if you have any questions as a result of anything I have written in my letters please talk to me personally or by email to the address below.

To close, I will quote another letter writer and leave you with one final thought. In his first Epistle to the Corinthians (16:2), Paul challenges us to plan our giving as a first priority along with our food, utilities and rent, in accordance with our income, rather than as an afterthought.

On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. (Chapter 16, verse 2)

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