

St Thomas Church Rondebosch

Rector's Report to the Annual Vestry Meeting 22 February 2018

God willing, I am presenting my second last "Annual Vestry Meeting Report" this evening. I will be celebrating my 38th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood on Pentecost Sunday. In all that time as a priest I have never wanted to be put on a pedestal. I wanted all the congregations where I have served to know that I am just a mere mortal who has responded to God's call on my life of ordination to the priesthood. Even as a priest, I remain a human being just like everyone else, trying my level best to convey something of the love of God and understanding of God I have found in Jesus, to those in my pastoral charge, that has hopefully been inspiring for faith in God, commitment to Christ and faithful church membership. In May 2009 I was the first person of colour to be licensed as Rector of St Thomas Church Rondebosch. With 10 years to retirement, I told the congregation at my licensing that it marked the beginning of a new adventure in faith and ministry with you, which I hope and pray will be an exciting, life affirming and enriching journey. I expressed the hope and prayer that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide us as we seek together to find an authentic way, as truthfully and honestly as possible to give expression to what we believe the Good News of the Gospel is within our Anglican Ethos. Of course this can be very challenging and some won't like it because they don't want their belief system stretched! Besides the damage done to the Church because of our past South African history under Apartheid and the segregation that was proclaimed and practiced under the guise of Christianity, the proliferation of new "Supermarket Style Churches," makes it easy for people to pick and choose where they go to church in order to hear what they are comfortable with and suits them.

Very early on in my ministry I was told by a spiritual father Bishop: "you will be a compassionate priest to God's people" and I was certainly called upon to deal with many grave matters affecting both clergy and laity that required enormous care and compassion. I was also told by a spiritual father Archbishop: "you will be a good teacher of the faith to God's people." Thus my passion was ignited to try and play my part in ensuring that the people in the pews become more biblically literate and theologically learned. With those blessings I have worked very hard to empower the laity, to remain open to new ideas and give people as much scope as possible to be involved and stay involved in the church's ministry. I think I can say without fear of contradiction that by and large, wherever else I have served the response has been heartening to say the least.

The good thing about this parish is the fine record we have kept of our journey thus far over the past couple of years. A viable church can never be one where everything is left up to the rector or the clergy.

In a parish with such an array of talented and gifted people, I have made an impassioned plea to the younger generation, people with skills who are not yet involved: “out of love for the Lord respond to God’s call on your life and offer yourselves.” I have also appealed to those who have been in leadership and still have energy and strength left but stepped out for a while: “to consider offering yourself for active service once again.” I have implored the sisters and brothers in Christ to come on board and help us take our church to the next level from the pulpit, pew-news and personally. But to convince the members of our congregation to respond to God’s call on their lives has proved harder here than anywhere else I have served. So our parish has been kept viable by what the clergy, Revds. Nicky Ing, Lorna Lavarello-Smith and I do and more especially by what an overstretched faithful few laity do, who are involved in the church’s ministry opportunities that are on offer in our parish. I praise God for all of you and thank God for your selfless commitment and dedication. And I mean every member in every ministry you are involved with, no matter how menial, insignificant, unnoticed or unappreciated you may feel.

We have made the most important focus of the past three years, that of trying to raise the next generation of parishioners and leaders, who are deeply committed to Christ and willing to make the sacrifices necessary to serve the Lord through getting involved in our church life. We have tried to grow our church inter-generationally but with particular emphasis on growing and developing our Junior Church and Teen Church by reaching out to young families. Reverend Lorna Lavarello-Smith coming to our parish two years ago as assistant priest was a high-level strategic appointment to assist us in moving forward to achieve this goal. We have been richly blessed as a parish, with the unique contribution both you and your husband Drew have made with your specialised gifts and experience of working with young people and their families. The intention is for all of us to work hard at building on the foundations that have been laid through the “Strategic Planning Process of 2014/2015, by introducing new and innovative approaches to ministry and especially to enthuse new younger leaders to become involved and grow that leadership for the future. It is proving to be more difficult than imagined. Because of a number of factors that make ministry here at St Thomas’s particularly challenging we agreed to have a “Youth Strategy Meeting” on the 3rd February 2018 to which all interested parishioners were invited. The long view noted the fact that St Thomas’s has a history of rectors not being in a position to give the parish one hundred percent attention because being senior clergy they are called upon to perform many extra-parochial duties and functions. The current rector is one of the most senior clergy in the Diocese. The value of his expertise, experience and wisdom is sought to give input at Archdeaconry, Diocesan, Provincial and Worldwide Anglican Communion level. His inability therefore to give 100% percent of his time to the parish is felt most, especially in an era when all mainstream church attendance is in decline, our parish no less.

That being said I want to reiterate what I said in church on Sunday 4 February by way of thankyou to all involved in the Saturday Youth Strategy Meeting: The overview of what is currently being offered here at St Thomas' in terms of young peoples' ministry in "Junior Church, J (Jesus) – Walkers, Inspire, KFC (Kids for Christ), Messy Church and the Family Service is of such a high standard and quality I wish more of God's children could experience it. The level of commitment, dedication and enthusiasm of the teachers is laudable and I praise God for them. Pray God that more teachers will come on board and that more parents will bring more children more consistently! We remain committed to Messy Church despite the logistical and other technical challenges. The use of the Parish Hall for Messy Church has limitations with no sound amplification and poor acoustics and especially a permanent hirer of long standing restricting access for set up and preparations. Our Messy Church Team is going to experiment with some innovative ways to overcome these challenges. The limitations of the hall are not new. Some of you will recall that four years ago we commissioned the architect who designed the Woodlands Pavilion at Bishop's, to produce a concept drawing for a purpose built Youth Centre that would span the gap between Teen House and the hall next to the hockey field. It was hoped to be the third phase of our parish plant development. The architect presented a modest yet attractive building plan, replete with chill zones for young people to just hang out, lounge around or chill and many other attractive features for youth ministry. If costs were not prohibitive it would have been built and Messy Church would not have had any of the current difficulties. Visionary leadership has certainly not been in short supply. Economic constraints and the challenges of growing our church has and still are obstacles we have to work hard to overcome.

A well-meaning parishioner of long standing castigated the rector, churchwardens and parish council for not doing enough to address the decline in church membership. We were reminded how back in the day it was sometimes necessary to put chairs down the centre aisle for the 9.30 am service. Deploring the current church attendance he suggested we should be having 600 people in church on a Sunday. I hope that is more prophetic than wildly optimistic as we seek to grow our church, and there are plans afoot. At the Diocesan Synod held in our church in September 2017, a motion was passed for our Diocese to adopt and implement a "Season or Decade of Intentional Discipleship Making" to grow our Church. It reads as follows:

International Season of Intentional Discipleship

This Synod, noting that

1. One of the priorities arising out of the Archbishop's charge is Theological Education and Training, which includes intentionally making disciples of all our people;

2. The Anglican Consultative Council has called on every province, diocese and parish in the Anglican Communion to adopt a clear focus on discipleship by having a Season or Decade of Intentional Discipleship;
3. Our Provincial Synod of 2016 unanimously affirmed 2 above Therefore:
 1. Welcomes this call, accepts the challenge and affirms plans emerging out of the launch of the Season or Decade of discipleship at Anglicans Ablaze 2016;
 2. Respectfully requests Growing the Church to work with the Diocesan GTC Team to provide resources and training to help with this process in our Diocese, giving due regard to the diversity of our parishes and reflecting an inclusive approach to discipleship.

In November 2017 I convened the meeting of all rectors, clergy and churchwardens comprising the Rondebosch Archdeaconry Council where Diocesan GTC team leader made a presentation. We agreed to seek Bishop Garth Counsell's permission to go ahead. Archdeaconry clergy received the permission in December 2017. In February 2018 we ratified the roll out of the Intentional Discipleship initiative in our parishes. It will start place in September 2018 preceded by the identification of 3 lay people from each parish to go for training, to train trainers to make disciples. Please pray for this initiative to grow our church and the Church.

In conclusion I want to touch briefly on the need to identify new revenue streams to ensure sustainable income for the future mission and ministry of our church. I know of no Anglican Church today which can thrive, if not survive, dependent purely on dedicated giving, through tithe, pledge and collection plate. Churches also depend on hiring, letting, donations and fundraising to supplement traditional revenue streams. I must thank all the faithful givers in our parish and pray that you will continue to bless the existence, mission and ministry of our church through your generosity. If we want to fulfil our vision to become a preferred and leading church for all generations we not only need sacrificial giving from parishioners but also need to look for other opportunities to raise money as well. We have already been surprised by the sense of fun and fellowship fund raising efforts like the Spring Markets and Food Fair engendered. Initiatives like these and others must surely become a regular feature in our calendar. We have a convener but he will need a committee to support him. I want to add to that by reminding ourselves that we have been endowed with a magnificent church plant in a prestigious location. At some point we must begin a conversation to explore whether an innovative and visionary utilisation of our grounds might not offer the possibility of additional sustainable income as we embrace the future.

Once more thank you to everyone involved in making us who we are and keeps us striving to become better at what we do, in terms of mission and ministry and making St Thomas' a good spiritual home. I especially want to thank the churchwardens Peter Oscroft and Hugh Nourse, alternate warden Ian Paul, the treasurer Peter Coutts and members of the Parish Council for all your support and hard work. And last but not least, for the sterling job as always our Parish Administrator Caroline Westwood does with managing the Parish Office, thank you very much. And once again thank you for being present here at our Vestry meeting. God bless you.

Ven Keith De Vos

Rector.