

Godly dissatisfaction . . .



Ian Blshop writes

The spectacular Jodrell Bank dominates the skyline when you look out from the top of the medieval church tower in Middlewich. For years the immense and beautiful dish of the Lovell telescope has gazed out into the stars looking for signs of life. Nothing yet has been found out there in space, but if the spiritual telescope is trained on this part of Cheshire, life can be seen emerging from what at first glance might have seemed dark empty space. I've always been captivated by stories of revival, where churches once considered to be dying are transformed into springs of life. Like Ezekiel's river in the desert, bringing life where it didn't seem possible. Well I'm not claiming we've seen that sort of change but I still get excited about what God is doing here.

We've been fortunate at St Michael's in Middlewich to live through eight years of gentle development. What attracted me in the first place was potential. I could see that in the Church were people who were hungry to develop and deepen their own faith and who had a godly dissatisfaction with where they and the Church were. Perhaps that is the first sign of life to look for in any Church. Like the green shoots of the snowdrops breaking through the hard winter ground you have to have people trying to break new ground to reach for the light of Christ. Often people like that seem to be a nuisance because of the speed with which they point out the Church's shortcomings! Or maybe they can see what the Holy Spirit is doing!

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The ground in Middlewich was a bit frost bitten, making it hard for the green shoots to break through. A church stuck in a traditional rut, no facilities at all, no church hall not even a loo! A church stuck on a roundabout surrounded by roads and isolated from its community, few children, no young families, minimal work with old people and none at all in the schools. It was living year to year on diminishing investments that were intended to be used for growth not stagnation. Ray Simpson in his book *Church of the Isles* says that 'The main thrust of central church planning in the last decade of the century was how to decline efficiently.' That was also true of Middlewich. If the new shoots were to be given the chance to grow, something had to change.



Photo: Martin Cavender

'Smilers' is one of the four children's groups that are now running at St Michael's.

in Middlewich

I started in 2001 and even before my licensing we changed things. A new weekly family service was agreed upon. Service times altered a bit, and to many people's surprise, when we started the experiment, families began to emerge. Fiona, Sally, Julie and Amanda amongst others brought their kids along to join ours. It was (and still is) unsatisfactory in so many ways but a bit of life broke out.

After the weekend Mark wrote to Martin Cavender saying, 'watch this parish, the Holy Spirit is loitering with intent!' I rather liked that. Clearly he saw the green shoots.

Alpha was started and people came and a few got converted. From there Cell groups were formed and currently about 80 people meet weekly together. Two or three couples who lived in Middlewich but who had worshipped elsewhere when they felt the church was going nowhere, heard what was happening and decided to support their local church.

The first ever parish weekend proved a turning point. To my amazement 100 people came to hear Mark Tanner, then an Associate with Resource. After the weekend Mark wrote to Martin Cavender saying, 'watch this parish, the Holy Spirit is loitering with intent!' I rather liked that. Clearly he saw the green shoots.

We'd started to develop our children's work by employing Emma. Sadly we ran out of money and had to let her go, but a year on things had improved, so following the parish weekend, Jeremy, who had come to lead the children's work, was employed full time, a miraculous and astonishing decision that the PCC took unanimously even though we didn't have the money.

And so the story goes on. We've now bought the shop opposite the church which is being converted to provide desperately needed space for the children's work, space for other 'fresh expression' type things to develop like slimming clubs and card making groups and a million other ideas that people have.

The congregation is more than double what it was, the income more than triple what it was. But let's be honest, if you didn't know where we had come from, you wouldn't see anything remarkable about where we are. I see lots of difficult issues we haven't even begun to tackle, the heating pipes are leaking, we have significant opposition to making any physical changes to our Grade 2* medieval church, our spirituality is not where it should be, our worship too often bland and unexciting, our prayer life is patchy, our fellowship at times shaky.

But that's church life isn't it? I still

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At the heart of it is the same thing we started with. There is a group of people, albeit a larger group than we started with, who want to develop and deepen their own faith and who still have a godly dissatisfaction with where the church is. They are the ones who are breaking the ground reaching for the light of Christ. These are the people who have led our church to a place where we are experiencing all the joys and challenges of seeing new life take shape. As long as that godly dissatisfaction is still here I reckon by the power of the Holy Spirit new life will continue to spring up. 

about the writer

The Revd Ian Bishop is Rector of St Michael and All Angels Middlewich and St John the Evangelist Byley and since 2005 Rural Dean of Middlewich. Middlewich is a Cheshire town built on the salt industry with now about 15000 inhabitants. Byley is a very small rural community. He is married to Sue and they have three teenage sons.

