



Anglican Church of St John the Evangelist

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Youth ministry in the parish of Gordon

Greetings everyone.

You may remember that before I went on Long Service Leave I gave an undertaking to visit several parishes similar to ours. The purpose being to investigate what they are doing with respect to their Youth Ministry and also the successes and merits of the various programs. This was as a result of the outcome of the NCLS data that we received and the passionate discussions that occurred regarding the organ where the desire for youth ministry was raised as a key issue for the parish.

I am very excited to be able to share with you the results of my research, but also to share with you the beginnings of a plan to address this very significant issue for our parish. I, like many of you, am excited by the opportunities that focusing on Youth Ministry will bring to our community. Having said that, my research suggests that there are a number of issues that we will need to address together if we are to achieve real and lasting change in this area.

Before I commenced long service leave I identified churches that had the closest proximity to our style of church in the community. I visited three Evangelical Churches near to us, Killara, Pymble and Turramurra, two churches with similar liturgies to us, Christ Church St. Lawrence, and King St. in the city, a country parish church in South Australia, Goolwa, and Mudgee.

The three Evangelical Churches all have BCP services, and some modern form of liturgy that while not identical to us is near enough in approximation to be helpful for us. The two Sydney city churches are very much like us in liturgy, and how they operate with respect to their congregation, more on that later. The Mudgee and Goolwa churches were very similar to our style of worship, but in a country environment and simply provide a nice contrast. You can see a detailed summary in APPENDIX 1.

There are a number of challenges to youth ministry here as I see it at the moment. These range from the broad area from which we draw our congregation to our willingness to change the way in which we worship. We have a history of success in this area, but we need to be mindful that what worked in the past may not work in the future. I have outlined in APPENDIX 2 more detail around the specific challenges that I identified in my travels. However, we cannot resolve these issues until we resolve the main one and that is, we have not identified what we mean by youth ministry.

Youth Ministry doesn't mean the same thing to everyone. For some it might mean a robust youth group, for others it's more young children attending services, for others it might be seeing more young adults. Until we are clear on what we mean by Youth Ministry and what we want to achieve we will not be successful.

We also need to get clear what our point of difference will be to encourage people to come to us and not to the other 6 churches with a strong youth culture in a very small geographical area. Ultimately, we will need to take a close look at ourselves. The final challenge is going to be us. How committed are we to this as a parish to the changes we need to make? What are we willing to do ourselves to achieve this?

There is one thing that I would like to clarify and that is that as far as I am concerned money, or the lack thereof, is not a stumbling block to our Youth Ministry efforts. I firmly believe that once we have clarified our purpose and addressed our own internal issues, money will not be an impediment, regardless of the outcome of the organ project.

The side debate that we had on youth ministry during the organ discussions, while a distraction, raised important issues for us as a parish. However, as I believe I have pointed out there are a lot of issues to deal with before we get to the issue of financing youth ministry.

As we continue to discuss the issue of Youth Ministry further and start to crystallise our plan I would like us to avoid some of the behaviours that arose during the organ debate. I would like us all to remember that despite our different opinions, we all have the same intent, to do what's best for St John's. We are all brothers and sisters in the Lord and so whilst I encourage passionate debate, let us do so carefully, considerately, and in the love of God.

When we meet to discuss this issue we will need to keep in mind that the sole purpose of the debate is to get the best outcome for our parish's future. Time and time again I hear from people they want St. John's to keep on going. That is fantastic to hear. (Not that I think it's going anywhere in any case.) My spirits soar to hear people speak about God's church like that. That needs to be the goal that we keep in the back of our mind as we engage in this debate.

So, what's next? I plan to call a meeting in February to discuss this important issue.

Between now and then I would like the parish to do two things;

1. Pray about this important issue, especially the barriers I have identified. We need to figure out how to overcome them.
2. Consider what you might be able to do to help. I cannot do this on my own, I need your help. What can you do?

If you have any comments or thoughts regarding this issue, please contact me at rector@stjohnsgordon.org.au by 31 January 2018 so I can take them into account as I plan for our February meeting.

All that is left to say is thank you for your passion and commitment to St John's. As I returned from Long Service Leave it was with a renewed desire to work with all of you to continue to grow our community and share our love of God.

With every blessing to you all

Fr. Keith

APPENDIX 1 - OBSERVATIONS

Evangelical Churches

Of the three Evangelical Churches while they are certainly all different in their worship style, and structure they all have one common theme, when it comes to youth, they do not concentrate on youth, they concentrate on families. This is important.

Turramurra

This parish has three services on the Sunday morning, 7.45 BCP, 9 am Family Service 10.15 Traditional. The BCP service is virtually our BCP service with hymns, and Holy Communion. The 10.15 Service has the choir, does not always have Holy communion but uses the AAPB as its form either Morning Prayer or Holy Communion. The 9am service is all family worship with a band children's programme and no discernible liturgical form whatsoever.

Pymble

St Swithuns do things slightly differently. They have 8, 10, 5pm, and 7pm as their services. 8 is BCP, 10 is Morning Prayer with Holy Communion on the Second Sunday of the month, and no children's programme at either service. Their family service is at 5pm, and they have another at 7 which is a full on contemporary service.

Killara

This church community has two services 8am BCP with Holy Communion, and 10am contemporary family service with youth and children's ministry.

Of the three churches I visited, Turramurra is clearly the most successful, with Pymble and then Killara still in what could be described as rebuilding phase. After discussions with key people at Turramurra, the tightness of the services has required innovative approaches to the logistics of getting people on and off the property, and has led to some levels of dissatisfaction in the community that still needs to be addressed, and the new Rector is working hard to address those issues. Apart from Killara, the churches have excellent numbers of young families and a good spread of youth and children.

City Churches

King St

They have 7.45 BCP Holy Communion, 9am Holy Communion with Children's programme and 11am Choral Communion. This church has a children's chapel in the crypt where they have their own liturgy, and programme. Currently they have between 1 and 8 children in their children's ministry according to the co-Ordinator I spoke to.

CCSL

This parish has 7am Morning Prayer, 7.30 Holy Communion, 9 Holy Communion with Children's Ministry, and 10.30 Solemn High Mass. The 9am service has about 4-5 children in attendance from week to week.

St. Johns Gordon

Here at Gordon we have had in the past, on the outside, an exceptionally successful youth programme with SeaCEBS. I say on the outside because the SeaCEBS leader Ross Adams turned out to be a notorious paedophile and has been convicted for some of those crimes committed against some of the boys in his charge.

Having said that, does this mean that I think youth ministry has no future here, and is it an excuse for inactivity in this important matter? By no means on both counts.

Youth Ministry since SeaCEBS

There has been very little in the way of youth ministry since the devastating revelations about Mr. Adams. When I came there was a strong Sunday School ably led by parishioners, usually parents. This follows firmly in the tradition of good Sunday School oversight in the past, and I think specifically of someone like Susan Dunstan who did an excellent job by all accounts over many years, and I am sure there were others as well.

When I arrived here in December 2004 I commenced a process where we looked at the whole of the parish and its needs, and youth was one of the priorities. In 2005 we commenced a process to find someone to oversight the children's and youth ministry here, and we appointed Lynn Salama. Here time here of five years was a mixed success, the Kids Club was very successful in its self, but led to no extra children coming to church with their families, and over time the Sunday School diminished by natural attrition. Since her departure in 2011 there has been no further action.

Youth ministry as such has been non-existent, but there have been attempts to keep a children's ministry through Sunday School going. This has mixed results as parents with young children are erratic in their attendance for various reasons. The feedback from the parents is the programme is great and the children enjoy it, but other pressures are on them as well.

APPENDIX 2 – PERCEIVED CHALLENGES TO YOUTH MINISTRY

Challenges to Youth Ministry

I am committed to youth ministry in this parish, however, there are a few barriers that we need to deal with honestly and openly as a parish before we can get to the main issue. As I see them, and there may be more, or you may express them differently, they are;

1. We have not defined what we mean by Youth Ministry
2. Dealing with the past properly.
3. We have not fully factored in that we are a regional church as well as a local church.
4. Engaging in Youth Ministry will require a rejigging of how we operate as a faith community.
5. Our way of being church may have to change. (different to point 4)
6. Need to admit youth ministry might not be the answer, but family ministry.
7. The difficulty in getting someone to run youth ministry.

I see that none of these challenges include money.

1. What do we mean by Youth Ministry?

This is a critically important question to ask first. If I ask 10 different people in the church what is meant by youth ministry, I will probably get 5 completely different answers and 5 similar but differently put answers. As a parish we must have a clear vision of what we mean by youth ministry, and how we intend to implement it. This will necessitate a conversation as a parish. Youth Ministry is not a silver bullet that we can fire. My own opinion is that one of the reasons Lyn Salama's time was not as effective as it could have been being that we were not clear on what we thought youth and children's ministry was, and just went and did it.

2. Dealing with the past properly

I believe we need to face up to what happened in the past with the SeaCEBS, but I feel that it needs to be dealt with separately.

3. We have not fully factored in that we are a regional church as well as a local church.

This is an important reality. We have families that come from Warrawee down to Roseville, West Pymble to St. Ives. These are all areas where there are already strong youth and children's ministries. Most of our families come to us for the morning services and their children go to local youth activities. This is because young people go where their friends go. It is natural. We are surrounded by St Ives, West Pymble, Roseville, and Pymble. Coupled with that, why would families struggle up and down the Pacific Highway, especially on a Friday to come to St. Johns when they can go to their more easily accessed local youth gathering?

4. Engaging in Youth Ministry will require a rejigging of how we operate as a faith community.

From my observations during my Long Service Leave, it appears we need to look seriously at all service times and service compositions and have a mature debate about these issues, but we can only do that once we have addressed point 1.

5. Our way of being church may have to change. (different to point 4)

This goes hand in hand with point 3. The Future Directions Group addressed this issue in its report and I commend the report for your perusal. It will need to be included in any discussion.

6. Need to admit youth ministry might not be the answer, but family ministry.

This will be helped by sorting out point 1. My own view is that family ministry is the way to go, but we will need to have a discussion on how to do that. I note, of course, that families imply young people but in this point it is about families in an holistic approach, not the focussed approach on just the youth.

7. The difficulty in getting someone to run youth ministry.

This is different to paying someone. During my time looking for someone in 2005 I first started looking within the diocese. I had many people interested, about 4 or 5, and I interviewed them, and they seemed keen to come. However, after they went back to college, one by one they all contacted me and said they were no longer interested. It was as if they were warned off coming to St. Johns. Others would only come if they were given oversight of a congregation. Not the way I want us to operate as a parish.

We need to understand that even though there has been much progress in the understanding of the diocese and some at Moore College that this parish is not the enemy, there is still a long way to go in bridging the divide between us. This will mean that with all the good will in the world, with all the good intent on our part, with all our desire to have a youth ministry, finding someone to do it, will be extremely difficult. Not impossible, but extremely difficult.