

Back to Church Sunday 2009 – Leven Valley.

Services in the benefice, 27th September 2009:

9.30 am	Holy Communion	Haverthwaite
11.0 am	Holy Communion	Staveley-in-Cartmel
3.0pm	Pet Service	Haverthwaite
6.0 pm	Evensong	Finsthwaite

Refreshments were served after all four services.

The 9.30 am Holy Communion at Haverthwaite was designated as the parade service for our recently formed cub scout group. Attendance was 31 adults and 10 children – the equivalent service last year was 18 adults and no children. Many of the extras were accounted for by the parade service, although a few adults who would not normally be present were brought along – eg a very occasional husband came with his more regular wife.

The 11.0 am at Staveley was actually down in attendance 16, when approx. 20 would normally be expected. This caused a little despondency, but the lack of “fringe” people is probably accounted for by the fact that on the previous evening there had been a very successful concert-cum-service given by a Salvation Army Band, attended by approx. 60 people including a number on the fringe of the church, some of whom probably regarded that as their attendance for the weekend.

The pet service was started last year [in response to a very determined little girl who extracted a promise that we would have one]. It proved popular last year, and more so this second time – 28 adults and 28 children, plus an interesting assortment of pets, including a very noisy hen. Last year the service was held outside, but on a dull and cold afternoon we took the plunge and moved inside – which proved a good move. No problems, and a good number of people realising that coming to church can be fun [in a service which gave the opportunity for serious points to be made about the wonders of creation, and our responsibilities].

Evensong at Finsthwaite attracted 24 adults – the previous year 14 attended that service. One or two had made efforts to bring friends, and although returns may seem small there was a good feeling about the service.

Overall impressions.

This was an exercise well worth the effort. I had made the point that even if nobody responded to our invitations we should still issue them – outreach is not an optional extra for the church, but an inherent part of our faith.

Some comments made such as “what a pity it fell on our 9.30 Sunday” or “what a pity it fell on our Evensong Sunday” have made people think about the pattern and nature of our services. Is our priority to provide for the faithful, or to bring others to know God? Can these two be reconciled? We need to spend some time addressing these questions.

Several people have said that we have learned a lot this year which will help to make things better next year, which I think is a very positive way of approaching this venture, and reflects my experience in a previous parish where the first year was very much a learning experience.

I believe that there is one issue which needs addressing. Some of the publicity material for Back to Church Sunday suggests that we should not depend on special services on the day, as people returning might be disappointed to find something much less attractive to them. On the other hand the invitation cards we received said “We’d love to welcome you to a special service at our church”. Someone pointed out to me that this was hardly appropriate if the only service that Sunday was Evensong.

Personally I believe that there is room for both. I have hopes that we will be able to make the parade service a monthly event and encourage families to attend – using as simple a version of the Eucharist as is legal, newcomers young and old can be brought to understand the importance and value of the Eucharist, and be brought to partake in it [possible problem – children can be admitted to communion before confirmation after a short course, but adults can’t – how to deal with this with young families?]

Special services like the pet service have an obvious appeal, especially to the young – children were bringing adults to church. There is room for imaginative thinking here, whether or not we want to use the phrase “fresh expressions”.

Altogether I feel that the Back to Church Sunday initiative is a very valuable one. The national publicity was helpful. One regular churchgoer said that he had not realised at first that this was a national event but had thought it was just another of my whims. If we see the whole church acting as one, we are more inclined to join in.

In our small benefice attendance was nearly 140 on Back to Church Sunday, including more than 30 children. The potential is there, and if we accept the challenges before us I believe that great things can happen.

Canon Peter Calvert. October 2009.