

Bryan Harris's PARISH PROFILE



'It's one church with two buildings' stressed the Vicar, Rev. Simon Gates – perhaps a pointer to why the merger between two neighbouring parishes, St Thomas's and St Stephen's five years ago was so successful.

Telford Park is just off the South Circular Road in a 'triangle' formed by the Balham, Clapham South and Streatham Hill railway stations. It's a multi-cultural community with a wide range of incomes and lifestyles – the upwardly mobile living next to families on benefits, in an interesting mix of expensive Victorian and Edwardian houses and post-war council flats.

The two churches typify that mix. St Thomas's, built in the early 20th century, looks like you expect a church to look, sitting in its own churchyard and surrounded by £750k-plus terraced houses. St Stephen's, half a mile away is an undistinguished single storey brick building on the edge of a 1970s council estate, which replaced a Victorian church demolished when the estate was developed.

Merging was Bishop Nick's idea when he was Archdeacon of Lambeth. It was logical. The two parishes were geographically quite small. St Thomas's had a big building, a small congregation and a large 'fringe'. St Stephen's building was small, its congregation large and its fringe limited. From 2004 the two parishes worked closely together preparing for 'unification' which came about in 2005 when St Thomas's Vicar, Simon Evans, moved to Bournemouth. Simon Gates, who had been St Stephen's Vicar since 1996 also became Priest in Charge of St Thomas's and a year later Vicar of the new parish of Telford Park - with St Thomas's as its parish church and St Stephen's a 'chapel of ease'. He also became Area Dean of Lambeth South at about the same time!

Whilst both churches had the same evangelical roots there were some differences in tradition and so a pattern of worship developed across the two buildings with up to five services on Sundays retaining a variety of styles aimed at



Clockwise from top left... coffee time between services; the music group at 11am; Hannah with one of the Sunday School groups and a mock TV quiz on the environment at the 11am service.

providing 'something for everyone'. The new combined parish saw remarkable growth – at both buildings – including a doubling of the combined electoral roll. But growth brought its own challenges. St Thomas's already needed repair work so in 2006 the decision was taken to redevelop St Thomas's for the demands of the 21st century.

The work began last October installing underfloor heating, lighting, a servery for tea and coffee, disabled access, storage and rooms for a creche and Sunday School. It's going to cost them around £800,000 pounds half of which has been raised within the parish – through a mix of 'fun and fund raising' (led by FROST - a Friends organisation) and some very generous giving.

'Hectic'

Meanwhile everything has been happening at St Stephen's where the Sunday worship schedule is 'hectic'. On the first Sunday of the month there's an 8am BCP Communion followed by a 9.30 Morning Prayer (Common Worship, traditional hymns, organ and a growing 'Sunday

School'). On other Sundays with no 8am, the 9.30 is Holy Communion with the same traditional style. At 11am it's a less formal Morning Worship with a music group, crèche and three Sunday Schools catering for toddlers to late teens. Two Sundays a month that includes Holy Communion, though retaining its relaxed style. At 5.00pm on the first Sunday, 'Teatime Praise' is a half hour service for families with young children, followed by tea and cakes and at 7.00pm every Sunday there's an Evening Service with a different style each week (café church, Youth Praise etc.). Between the 9.30 and 11am there's time for the two 'congregations' to meet and chat over coffee. Mind you the 11am service has to run to time because at 12.30 members of a black Pentecostal church start to arrive for their weekly worship.

They hope to be re-opening St Thomas's for Easter with plans for a 6am Dawn Service and a united Easter Communion – all the congregations together! Then Bishop Richard will formally

dedicate the building at Pentecost. Between times they will have started the process of transferring worship from St Stephen's. The 8am, 9.30 and 5pm services will go back to St Thomas's first. The 11am service will stay at St Stephen's until phase two of St Thomas's redevelopment provides space for the children and youth work. Phase two also includes a baptistery for full immersion baptisms of adults so baptisms will stay at St Stephen's for now. There's still debate about the future location of the more 'experimental' 7pm service. But the intention is that eventually all current services will take place at St Thomas's.

Then the debate will focus on what happens to St Stephen's – also in need of work, probably costing around £450k. But with the Parish Office and a wide range of non-church users from a nursery and 6 mum & toddler groups to uniformed organisations, keep fit and even a local MP's surgery, it is a vital part of the local community. A few years back the parish was instrumental in the development Weir Link - a



Simon Gates and Betsy Blatchley

joint project with local residents to demolish the old Weir Estate Hall and build a new multi-purpose children's and community centre. Many of its management committee are also church members - and Simon Gates is Chairman. Some of St Stephen's current users are 'overflow' from the Weir Link and that must have a bearing on its options for the future.

Vibrant

Meanwhile the picture I got from a couple of visits is of a vibrant church looking forward to the extra space St Thomas's will provide. Congregations are growing with around 200 adults plus children in church most Sundays. Worship is lively with a lot of lay involvement. Youth and children's work is impressive – with a full time paid worker Hannah Phillips. As well the Sunday School groups at 9.30 and 11am, Hannah, a trained dancer, runs a Street Dance outreach on Mondays, with 40-50 young people and youth groups on Wednesday and Thursday evenings. She visits local schools and works closely with Associate Vicar Betsy Blatchley in the services geared towards young families - services like the mid-week 'Prayers and Bears' service which has attracted congregations of 60+ mainly new people, several of whom have since started going to Sunday worship.

The parish is a 'nappy valley' – with a higher than average proportion of young families and correspondingly low proportion of retired people. Not surprisingly baptism is an important part of the parish mission.

"We take baptism very seriously" says Simon Gates. "We operate an open baptism policy but we insist on a

preparation course and Prayers and Bears forms part of that. We also work hard to maintain contact with parents after the baptism, with parenting courses and a fathers group, for example."

Groups are integral to the present and future of the parish. With over 200 regular churchgoers it would be easy to lose touch with each other. But with five evening and two daytime home groups and plans for a group to get alongside newcomers, there's not much risk of that. The PCC keeps every aspect of church life under review with teams looking at worship, spiritual and numerical growth, and at ways for people to get involved in serving the community. One of the challenges which they are tackling is the under-representation of black and ethnic minority people in the church compared with the community.

Telford Park's people are generous. Church members give to a variety of causes overseas mission, the refurbishment of St Thomas's etc. 15% of their giving and another £20k raised on a gift day helps support overseas mission partners, a children's home in China and development work in Peru and Spinnaker Trust at home working in South London Primary Schools.

How would the parish like to be seen, I asked?

Simon Gates said "As a church which allows and encourages people to belong, wherever they are on their faith journey... which celebrates diversity in worship and offers a broad theological spectrum... which is concerned with being a blessing to its community and the world in general".