

Bryan Harris's PARISH PROFILE

St George, Camberwell



In 1886 Trinity College, Cambridge, decided to establish a mission - to benefit a poor area of London and to expose 'the young men of Trinity' to a different side of life. They 'took over' a failing church in a deprived, overcrowded area of South London - and began a relationship which remains at the heart of St George's, Camberwell, today.

Early 19th century Camberwell was prosperous and a magnificent church was built in 1824 to serve the new St George's parish. But less than 50 years later the area had declined, the church was in poor condition and the small congregation with little or no money couldn't even pay the Vicar! The intervention of Trinity brought a new start. The ageing cleric was given a retirement place - and a Trinity man moved in as Vicar, supported by a team of ex-Trinity clergymen. A clergy house was built and premises for a Mission were rented and then built with the Vicar as Warden. And for 125 years Trinity in Camberwell has been the base for an impressive range of social and religious work from schools and District Nurses to organisations for men, women, boys and girls - all achieved with financial and hands-on support from Trinity alumni and students.

In the 1970s two major changes happened - the huge Georgian church was declared unsafe and the congregation moved into St George's School. The mission buildings were compulsorily purchased and demolished as part of the creation of Burgess Park. With the Compulsory Purchase compensation and funds from the college, the parish and the Diocese, the current Trinity College Centre was built next to the school in 1981. It includes halls and rooms for community activities - and at its heart a worship space for the St George's congregation.

A 'time-traveller' from Victorian Camberwell would

find it hard to recognise St George's today. The first obvious difference is the surroundings - most of the Victorian terraced housing was destroyed in wartime bombing - replaced by massive blocks of flats many of which are themselves now being pulled down in favour of more human scale homes. The old imposing St George's Church is still standing but converted into flats. Today's church is part of the single storey red-brick Trinity College Centre - less imposing but somehow also on a more human scale - and surprisingly approached through one of the few (narrow) Victorian streets remaining. And of course the congregation has changed. The original Regency congregation would have been white middle class. But today nearly 80% of the congregation is African or Caribbean - including many young families - reflecting the change in the local population particularly over the last ten years, as South Londoners have moved (or been moved) out of the area.

Our Victorian would also notice a difference in the worship - and not just the switch from Book of Common Prayer. The Vicar, Rev. Nicholas Elder described the style as 'liberal Catholic - with an African twist' - helped by congregation members who bring in CDs of African music which is then incorporated

into the worship. That's just one of many changes Nicholas Elder has seen during ten years as Vicar - often prompted by what has been a 'tradition' for some 20 years. On the Sunday before the Annual Parish Meeting the sermon is replaced by a 'sharing of hopes' for the year ahead. The congregation gather in groups around the building and discuss what they like and want to continue, what they think could be done better, what could be started and what could be stopped! Nicholas and his two clergy colleagues, Associate Priest James Saxton and NSM, Marie John keep out of the groups - "they might just say what they think we want to hear" he said. However SPA, Doreen Evans and the churchwardens took part in the discussions.



Rev. Nicholas Elder

After they had talked each group reported back on its deliberations - and a quick flick through the results of the session speaks volumes about the church - and why its numbers are growing week on week.

They liked the welcoming, homely and friendly atmosphere; the Sunday service that is 'not too long'; friendly clergy; being a diverse and inclusive community; good sermons and a small cosy building. The 'could do better' list included getting to know each other better through social events, including day trips and (inevitably) more people getting involved in

running the church and an active role in worship for the young people. The only things they wanted to stop were 'people arriving late' and being noisy! The wish list was lengthy - from a Sunday evening service, to a Men's Group, links with other parishes and Bible study groups. But the congregation know that the wish list often gets results because they say they have 'clergy who listen'. St George's now has a Watch Night Service at New Year at the request of the congregation, despite some reluctance from Nicholas Elder who said "I'll do it once, you come and we'll do it again". He did, they did and now it's a fixture! A monthly choir and a Mothers' Union branch now being formed both came from the wish list!

Currently there is really only one weekly service - the 10am Sunday Eucharist. The clergy team say morning and evening prayer during the week but only occasionally with anyone else present. Mind you there's a massive turn out for special occasions - the biggest of which is probably St George's Day, when staff and pupils at the church school have a non-uniform day - all dressing up in red and white and in the morning parade to the church with home made flags for a service with parents and congregation members. In the afternoon they hold St George's Day parties for the children. On the Sunday there's an all age celebration with members of the neighbouring St Luke's congregation.

The Sunday service varies slightly from week to week - on the first Sunday each month it's 'All-Age'; on other Sundays there's a junior church (with lots of children). On the second Sunday laying on of hands for healing and wholeness is offered and on the third Sunday there is also a new but growing teenagers group. Congregation size is



Celebrating the Eucharist

around about 100 each week and growing mainly by members inviting friends to come and join them. "Back to Church Sunday was a damp squib here" said Nicholas Elder "We're seeing it happen every week!". Worship was lively and enthusiastic - with African tunes for much of the liturgy alongside traditional hymns. Music is provided by a CD - there is an organ, a very good one. But no organist - finding and funding one is on the wish list.

Financially the church 'survives' - by the time it has paid the running costs for the worship area (not the whole Centre) and its Fairer Shares contribution, there is little left for anything else. Fortunately the relationship with Trinity College remains very active. The college has a 'livings fund' which helps with the maintenance of the worship area and pays half of the stipend of the Associate Priest, James Saxton. He is a local community mental health chaplain so the NHS pays the rest. Nowadays the Vicar's stipend is paid by the Diocese (his duties as Warden are unpaid). But the fund helps with his expenses. The charity 'Trinity in Camberwell' pays for a part-time Warden's Assistant to help run the Centre and regularly appeals to past Trinity College students for funds to help with

the work and maintenance.

The college members also still have a 'hands-on' involvement. For many years Trinity students have taken part every year in a Summer Holiday Scheme where they move into the Centre (sleeping on the floors) and spend a fortnight providing activities for more than 100 local children. Trinity undergraduates support and tutor boys taking part in the Centre's 'Boyhood to Manhood Scheme' and help out in St George's School. They also give an escorted tour of 'uni' and an insiders view to minibus loads of Camberwell teenagers thinking about further education.

In the 2010 appeal brochure Nicholas Elder reflected that while the focus of the Centre has remained largely the same over 125 years in its concern for the needs of children and young people it has reinvented itself in each generation as priorities change. Currently the Centre accommodates a pre-school group and an after school club, a pop-in for adults with learning disabilities and a host of uniformed and other organisations - and is looking for a way to work with disaffected teenagers. The unique funding of the Centre means that financial viability is less important than meeting a need!

The Trinity connection was also 'noted' in the very complimentary Ofsted report on St George's School as helping children from the poorest 25% in Southwark to reach 'nationally significant' standards of excellence!

Finally, I asked Nicholas Elder what were the core values of St George's. He said "...very inclusive in all sorts of ways... non-factional... accessible worship... and we have fun together. And that's important.

"After all if you don't enjoy your time in church, how can you ask others to join you?"

One of the discussion groups



...and transcribing the response

