

Reading the passages underlined some points that were important to the group:

- We need to encourage people coming to worship to be prepared to hear God speak
- Worshipers come to worship – not to see a performance by a preacher – worshippers might have to work at that
- Our church is open to use various forms of worship

Where do we go from here?

Our discussions were much more wide-ranging than can be reported here. But we were finally reminded of learning the difference between *activity* and *productivity*. Also, if our church is aiming at *nothing* it will hit it. So we had a go at producing some statements which might clearly speak about our church's aims and goals, and our mission.

Small groups attempted it in a very short time – with these results.

What is the mission of our church?

- To show God's love through our actions to all we meet both inside and out of church. In all areas of our life. To enable others to come to know God.
- To love our neighbour as ourselves and share the good news by our actions. To reach out to the community. To provide a portal for accessing God and receiving God's message, Spirit ... To be there for people.

Put together these became.

Our task is to be here as a congregation and to provide the portal for people to be able to reach God and receive from God. To show God's love through our actions to all we meet both inside and out of church, in all areas of our life, to enable everyone to come to know God. A community church with friendship and fellowship. An access point to God for everybody.

Summary

Gateways to God? was a series of discussions, taking an audit of church life. It was not a decision-making body but a group of people prepared to take a risk in seeing themselves as others see them and to accept the challenge to consider how the church might exist worshipfully and fulfil the calling of Jesus to 'go and make disciples'.

Where next?

GATEWAYS TO GOD?

The story so far

What is it?

Gateways to God? is an audit of church – buildings, worship and church life. It was produced by Dr Jack Lawson, District Development Enabler, and churches were encouraged to use it after the visit by members of the District (including the Chair) last August.

How did we do it?

Two separate groups met initially. The make-up of the groups changed. The last meeting was 'combined'.

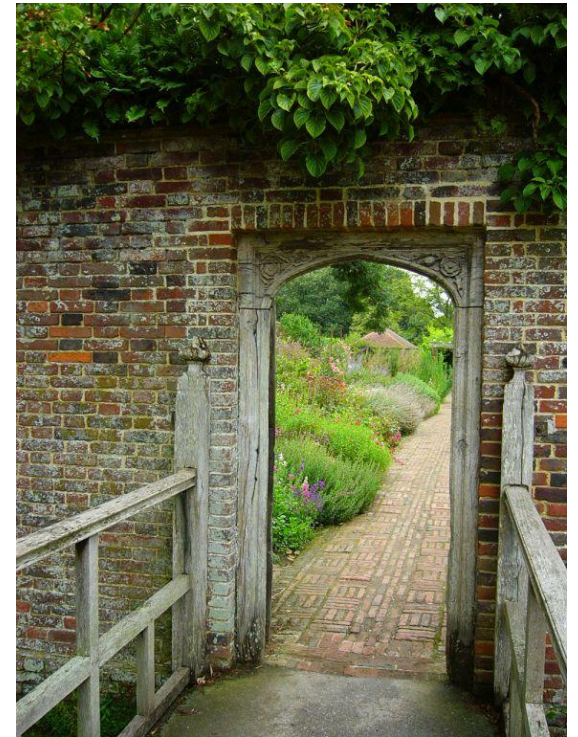
What was the Biblical base?

We were encouraged to read **John 15: 1 – 17** remembering that Jesus used a simple organic image for the Christian life and calling. The image of the vine reflects what gardeners know – that a branch of a vine doesn't die at once. It's fruit or leaves tend to die gradually. But the vine's life-sustaining sap still flows into the dying branch. That diminishes the fruit yielded by the healthier branches. The gardener therefore has to prune unhealthy branches.

At first we tried to look at the church from the eyes of someone who is not a member of our congregation.

Looking at the building

Both groups took a tour of the building, starting at the St Mary's entrance. We imagined what someone coming to an event like a coffee morning would see. Groups independently considered our notice boards and also recognised that someone coming through that entrance to the New Room could miss the fact that there is a church because of the solid entrance door.



Groups saw a need to indicate that people were coming into a Methodist church (should there be something about our faith?) and to show some of the things we felt important as church members, eg Fairtrade. Perhaps a plan of the building. Clear pointers to various rooms.

Our discussions were often frank and heated but throughout appreciative of the people who take on the tasks of publicity – who themselves shared their ideas and visions.

We were also encouraged to think of the ‘transparency’ or otherwise of worship – do we use furnishings, objects, that even our members don’t understand?

The building showed us quite a bit about our church life – and that led us to the next stage.

Our church as a vine

In spite of the fact that a number of us didn’t see ourselves as particularly artistic, group members then attempted to portray the church as a vine – looking at what we felt were areas of the building and church life which were like green shoots which would eventually produce fruit – and those areas which were taking more energy than is realistic because they appear to be becoming dead wood.

It was important to realise that this wasn’t intended to be an entirely negative exercise – there was much to be positive about.

Where we were at this point

We’d identified a few areas which could be discussed in appropriate forums (eg a property meeting or Church Council). These included -

- Is there any advice available about church publicity?
- Would it be helpful for the church to have a leaflet about who we are, readily available for anyone visiting the building?
- Can anything be done about the door into the church?
- How can the building become a focus for our mission rather than the building we meet in?

Who are we as a church community?

The two groups then moved on to look more at our faith and how we might describe our faith to other people. Are we willing and comfortable to do this? If our churches were businesses, would people know what our produce is?

One important factor which appeared in both groups independently was an acknowledgement that at any time the church community might be made up of different age groups – but that this changed from time to time. We didn’t need to be over-anxious that some groups aren’t represented – but support those which are.

What does the community say to other people?

With mission high on the agenda, both groups spent some time thinking about the impression a newcomer might gain in worship. There was recognition that church uses unique language and symbols – but an underlying feeling that some unique aspects are necessary and sometimes helpful. The problem comes if they are not properly explained.

Groups wanted to underline the importance of a church service being a special place to meet God where people could find the warmth of support from other people.

Our worship –

A place to meet God?

Thinking again about ‘transparency’ we talked about helping unchurched people to know when to stand up and sit down; what to do at communion. Recognising that we do not meet God and come away just as we were before, how can we all be part of a worshipping community which brings people to God?

Where is the ‘wow factor’?

The final session began by looking at the Biblical understanding of worship using a number of Bible passages.

Passages we read included:

- Genesis 28 A gateway to heaven. An awesome but not terrifying place.
- Psalm 8 Worship through praise. Celebrating all creation, using a variety of gifts – music, pictures, flowers
- 1 Kings 19 Elijah in no doubt who has been talking to him
Dynamic signs of God’s presence – hard to ignore
- Isaiah 6 A reality check, reminding the church to look at itself
The magnificence of God – speaking and challenging
- Acts 9 Saul not expecting to see God

The passages also pointed us to the power of personal testimony.