

Church Vision Day – Summary of Introduction, Bible Reflection, Vision Statements and Group Feedback

Notes by Steve Smith

Introduction

The session began with a summary of the benefice discernment process undertaken over the previous eleven months. It was explained that the vision presented had emerged from a wide range of sources, including:

- Congregation questionnaires
- Team meetings and gatherings
- Individual conversations
- Informal discussions over coffee
- Written reflections and letters
- Emails from members of the congregations
- Prayer and ongoing discernment

The intention was to draw together the themes that had consistently emerged rather than introduce entirely new ideas.

Identified strengths

Several strengths were highlighted:

- A strong reputation for warmth, welcome and fellowship across both churches.
- Faithful, committed congregations with a deep love of God, Scripture and prayer.
- Home groups providing an important foundation for discipleship.
- A wide range of established outreach ministries, including the Big Breakfast, toddler group, Open the Book, school chaplaincy, Churches Together initiatives and links with the Foodbank.
- Significant physical resources, including both church buildings, the Glebe, the Church Centre and St Peter's Hall.
- Growing unity between St Andrew's and St Peter's.
- Increasing engagement from toddlers, young families and new members.

Challenges

The presentation also acknowledged several challenges:

- Ageing congregations.
- A significant gap in the 20–40 age group.
- Difficulty retaining some new families after initial contact.
- Heavy reliance on a relatively small number of volunteers.
- A need for improved communication and collaboration.
- Financial pressures affecting both churches.

Signs of encouragement

Alongside these challenges, several encouraging developments were identified:

- Increasing unity across the benefice.
 - New family connections through toddler groups and family activities.
 - Growing interest in Bible study and discipleship.
 - A renewed sense of vision, momentum and energy.
 - Stronger links with schools and nurseries.
 - A noticeable increase in joy and laughter within church life.
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Bible Reflection – Ephesians 3:14–21

The Bible reading formed the theological foundation for the vision.

The reflection focused on Paul’s prayer in Ephesians rather than on practical church organisation. Particular emphasis was given to several themes.

Prayer for inner transformation

Paul’s prayer was described as focusing on inward transformation rather than external circumstances. The emphasis falls on believers being strengthened “in the inner being” through the Holy Spirit, enabling Christ to dwell within them.

Rooted and grounded in love

The imagery of being “rooted and grounded” was connected with the discernment process, where the image of deep roots had repeatedly emerged. Growth was presented not simply as numerical growth but as spiritual maturity, stability and depth.

Knowing Christ’s love

Attention was drawn to Paul's description of the breadth, length, height and depth of Christ's love, encouraging the congregation to move beyond intellectual knowledge towards experiencing God's love more fully.

God is able

The reflection concluded with Ephesians 3:20–21, emphasising God's ability to do "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." Participants were invited to reflect prayerfully on what God might do through them individually and through the benefice collectively.

The central application was that growth in every area of church life must begin with spiritual growth rooted in Christ.

Vision Statement

Following the Bible reflection, the overall benefice vision was presented:

One benefice. Two distinct churches. Rooted in Christ. Growing deeply. Loving widely.

The vision aims to maintain the distinct identities of St Andrew's and St Peter's while strengthening their shared life and mission.

Annabel expressed a hope that the benefice would become known for:

- Love for one another.
 - Welcoming newcomers.
 - Strong engagement with the wider community.
 - Joy and laughter within church life.
 - Worship involving all generations.
 - Equipping and empowering members for ministry.
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Mission Statements

St Peter's

A peaceful presence in a busy world, steadfast in faith and courageous in our care for our community.

This reflects St Peter's location, hospitality, ministry of welcome, and desire to deepen discipleship while serving the surrounding community.

St Andrew's

Strengthening our discipleship with faithful rhythms and sharing God's heart for our community with joyful expectation.

This reflects the existing emphasis on discipleship, the church's resources for ministry and outreach, and an expectation of continued growth through God's work.

Feedback from Discussion Groups

Following the presentation, participants met in groups to discuss the Bible passage, the vision and the mission statements.

Themes from the Bible passage

Across the groups, several common themes emerged:

- God's power working within believers.
- Being rooted in Christ and grounded in love.
- The immeasurable greatness of God's love.
- Confidence that God is able to do more than can be imagined.
- The importance of spiritual depth before outward activity.
- Dependence on the Holy Spirit.
- Keeping Christ, rather than buildings, traditions or personalities, at the centre.

Some groups particularly appreciated reading the passage in *The Message* translation, noting its emphasis on God's gentle work in believers.

Responses to the vision

Participants generally felt the vision reflected the themes of Ephesians 3.

Particular appreciation was expressed for:

- The emphasis on being rooted in Christ.
- Love as the central characteristic of the benefice.
- The balance between unity and maintaining the distinct identity of each church.
- The focus on growing spiritually before expanding ministry.

Several groups commented positively on the hopeful and outward-looking nature of the vision.

Responses to the mission statements

Many participants welcomed having clear mission statements for each church.

Positive comments included:

- Appreciation of the emphasis on joyful expectation.
- Recognition that spiritual practices should remain central.
- Encouragement that both churches have complementary roles within one benefice.
- The clarity of the St Peter's statement.

Some discussion focused on the phrase "faithful rhythms" in the St Andrew's mission statement. Several groups found the wording unclear and suggested alternatives such as "framework" or "regular habits." It was later explained that the phrase referred to regular spiritual practices such as prayer, worship, Scripture and discipleship.

Challenges identified

Several common challenges were identified by the groups:

- Maintaining momentum over the coming years.
 - Supporting ageing and sometimes tired congregations.
 - Sharing responsibility more widely to avoid volunteer burnout.
 - Ensuring that everyone remains united around the shared vision.
 - Listening carefully to God's guidance throughout the process.
 - Creating effective pathways for discipleship for those who join the churches.
 - Finding opportunities to engage the wider community.
 - Encouraging members to use their gifts in ministry.
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Overall response

The feedback suggested broad encouragement and support for the direction being proposed. Participants particularly welcomed the Christ-centred foundation of the vision, the emphasis on prayer and discipleship, and the positive tone of hope for the future. Questions raised during the discussions mainly concerned the practical

implementation of the vision and the need to sustain volunteers, maintain unity and communicate clearly as the benefice moves forward.