

CHAPTER 23

THE FUTURE

by Rev. Brian Prentice, (Vicar 1990 -)



The story of the first 60 years at St. John's is exhilarating because it is a story of vision, faith, hope, perseverance and commitment. It is not a story without its difficulties, setbacks and disappointments, but it is predominantly one filled with episodes of joy, co-operation, community, love and success. But there is more - the story doesn't end there - it has a sequel which is still to be written, still to be lived and experienced.

Because it is a sequel, it will be very much building on the experiences of the past. If we have been walking down Memory Lane a little, it is more importantly an opportunity to catch our breath and be thankful for the blessings of the past, and to receive inspiration to move forward and be part of the continuing story.

The Church in Essington is not dead, but truly alive and kicking. It lives because God lives and the Church's "raison d'etre" is to be a witness to the glory of God. This witness is just as relevant in the 1990's as it was in the 1930's and so the story goes on.

One remarkable aspect of the story of St. John's is the recognition of how the two strands of continuity and change have held together. There are some things that will never change - eternal truths about God and man, to which the Church faithfully witnesses. God's nature is unchanging. He is a God of creation and love, who hates evil, and is active in preventing the world from destroying itself.

On the other hand, there have been many changes in the last 60 years, brought about by developments in

culture, technology, politics, education, the media, the environment, amongst other things. To be relevant, the Church must witness to the eternal truths of God in a way in which they can be heard and experienced in a modern context.

So then, if I am to speculate about future developments, this theme of continuity and change must be pre-eminent.

Continuity is represented by the church building and its constant presence in the heart of our village, a visible symbol of our unchanging and caring God. In a constantly changing world, the Church is a reassuring sign of permanence to all who pass by, whether or not they are church-goers. Within its walls, those who seek peace and quiet will find a place of dignified beauty, where prayer is natural. Although God's presence is not limited to a building, it is comforting to know that there is such a place of refuge available.

Of course, as worship has changed over the years, the interior of the church has adapted to meet new styles of worship. It is still the responsibility of the worshipping community to ensure that our church remains a sanctuary for future generations, while at the same time being aware that worship cannot stagnate. Music and liturgy are bound to change in order to be meaningful to successive generations. In the same way that Matins has largely given way to Parish Communion, so we may see, for example, more regular informal types of worship instead of the traditional Evensong.

Continuity in the past was always provided by the Vicar, as a fatherly figure in the village. More recently, as lay involvement has increased, Readers (trained lay people) have begun to play an important part in parish life as assistants to the Vicar. The 1990's will see the development of local ministry teams, whereby lay readers will share leadership with the Vicar. Whereas Readers traditionally concentrated on preaching and leading Evensong, future local ministers may well specialise in particular ministries such as youth work or visiting. At St. John's, we already have two members being put forward for this type of ministry, as well as our two Readers. This style of joint leadership is intended to encourage other lay people to discover and use their own gifts for the benefit of the Church. These are revolutionary changes which demand full commitment and adaptability from church members.

One of the major changes in church life over the recent years has been the higher profile given to women in leadership roles, through being ordained as Deacons, serving as Readers, holding office as Churchwardens and P.C.C. officials, as well as reversing the former male domination of church choirs. I am convinced that before the end of this century we shall see women exercising a full priestly ministry, and Essington could well one day have a lady Vicar.

For generations, the Church of England has benefited from many legacies, which have provided buildings, salaries, pensions and housing for clergy. These funds have now become insufficient to cope with inflation, and the burden is falling more and more on local congregations. Other denominations have had to face this for some years - it is a new challenge for the Church of England. It will probably happen that churches unable to

meet their own financial costs will find themselves without a Vicar. However, I believe that the faith, generosity and resourcefulness of the Essington people will rise to meet this need.

It has been said to me that "Essington isn't the village it was!" This reflects the many changes that have occurred over the last 60 years. Apart from the demise of the coal mines, the new motorways have fragmented the village, but their presence has brought about the building of new homes, and an influx of families with young children into the village. There is therefore the opportunity for the Church to develop youth work and provide a meeting place for mothers and small children. Because of its situation in the village, the church is also in an ideal situation to be a link between long-standing and new Essingtonians.

It must not be forgotten, however, that Essington parish also includes Westcroft and Newtown, neither of which has a church presence. It is envisaged that, with co-operation with local Methodist churches, some groups may be started to provide fellowship between Christians in those areas.

If the 1970's was the Decade of Innovation and the 1980's the Decade of Continuous Change, then the 1990's must be the Decade of Evangelism, involving a concerted effort to share God with the community and the world, and to recruit new members.

Our Flower Festival in July 1992 was a great inspiration to church members, as many people from the village who rarely come to church visited us and enjoyed the atmosphere and fellowship. A target has been set to double the congregation by the turn of the century. I believe that this is possible and will be achieved.

The story so far, then, reveals that this church exists because someone cared intensely for the spiritual life of the village. We know that the church has continued because as long as there has been a church in Essington, there have been Essington people who have worked for it. What a privilege we now have to continue stewardship of this heritage which has been handed to us. May God by the power of his Spirit help us to re-dedicate ourselves to the task.