

MATTHEW 13:-19,18-23
1 CORINTHIANS 3:5-15
ST JAMES', 9.9.18, 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

All living things grow. That's a basic lesson from biology. Lots of Jesus' parables are about plants growing: the parable of the sower, which we've just heard, is followed by the parable of the weeds, and the parable of the mustard seed. Mark also includes the parable of the seed growing (Mark 4:26-29), and the Vineyard in Isaiah 5 is one biblical picture of God's people. Jesus describes himself as *the true vine*, and his followers as the branches of that vine in John 15.

Another picture of the church in the Bible, especially in Paul's letters, is the body of Christ. Our physical bodies are constantly growing, as long as we're alive. Even if we're not growing taller or wider, we constantly produce new cells to replace old ones. Over the course of 10 years, almost all the cells in our body are replaced.

There are a number of things which plants need if they're going to grow and remain healthy: water is obviously essential; so is light and warmth from the sun, and good soil. In the case of human bodies, we also need water; also food, light, exercise, and sleep.

The observation that all living things grow is fundamental to *Leading Your Church into Growth*. The church is a living being, like a plant or a body. If it doesn't grow, it dies. So the question is, what does the church need if it's going to grow and stay healthy?

LEADING YOUR CHURCH INTO GROWTH

I hope that you're aware that we've been praying for growth at St James' for the last 18 months or so. We've included the prayer for growth in church services, and last year produced these bookmarks for people to take home. So I hope you've been using this prayer in your private devotions. There are fresh copies of the bookmark available today, so if you've lost yours, or never had one, please do take it home with you and use it as often as possible.

This prayer makes it clear that there are three ways in which the church grows. All three are vital, and each feeds into the others: growth in numbers – we want more people to come along to our services, and get stuck into church life; growth in spiritual commitment – we want all our members to be *attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ . . . to grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ* (Ephesians 4:13,15); and growth in service to our community – we want to be showing and telling the people around us who the Lord is, how precious each one is to him, and how they can respond to his love for them. For these things to happen, every single one of us needs to be playing our part, giving our energy, our time, our money, our service and our prayer to the advancement of the kingdom of God.

The prayer for growth comes out of *Leading Your Church into Growth*, which is firstly a residential course for church leaders, lay and ordained, which Jackie Jones and I attended in March last year. It's a course which has been running for almost 25 years. St Asaph Diocese has invested heavily in sending groups from across the Diocese on the

residential course in 2017, 2018 and 2019, as part of a plan to ensure that churches across our Diocese are indeed growing in every sense.

Of course only myself and one other person from St James' was able to benefit from the residential course. So earlier this year, we ran LyCiG *Local*, to enable as many other members as possible to catch the vision, and to realise that even this church can grow, and will grow if we're serious about it. Everyone in church had an invitation to the course. In the end, about 8 people from St James came to at least part of it.

One of the key concepts of *Leading Your Church into Growth* is called the Four Ps. The four Ps are things the church needs if it's going to grow and stay healthy. They are: Prayer, Presence, Proclamation and Persuasion.

Prayer The Psalmist tells us: *Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain* (Psalm 127:1). Whatever we do needs to be rooted in prayer, so that we can be sure that our vision is the Lord's vision, and that he's providing all that we need to work towards that vision. We can all pray, pray in the privacy of our own homes, and when we join together for prayer and worship; using our own words or the words of written prayers like the prayer for growth. Brother Roger of Taizé said this: "When the church becomes a house of prayer the people will come running." The first P is for Prayer.

Presence It's very hard to make any impact on our community if people just don't know we're here! We can make our presence felt in

lots of ways: visually by caring for our building and grounds, with eye-catching notices and publicity; through events we run or take part in, eg the Fundays on Rhosddu Park; through serving the community as a church.

Proclamation We're called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus, individually and as a church. It's our responsibility as Christians to be equipped to answer questions about our faith, *always being prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have* (1 Peter 3:15). Steve Barnett from St John's is planning to run a couple of sessions to help you in this. As a church, we need to plan events at which we can proclaim the Good News to outsiders; and of course, the Good News is preached in our regular worship services.

Persuasion A few people will want to know more, so we run small groups to discuss what Jesus' claims mean for them. Christianity Explored is starting this week at St Margaret's, and a few people from St James' will be going along.

At the end of the LyCiG *Local* course, we worked out three priorities for each church in moving forward with this programme. The priorities for St James' are: Mission and Outreach; Pastoral Care; Discipleship. Some of the people who came along have formed a small group to make sure we move forward with these priorities. As our first reading reminded us, our responsibility is to plant and water seed; it's God who gives the growth.

How can you be involved? Prayer – prayer breakfasts, before services, the prayer group which will be meeting on Wednesday evenings, starting on 26 September. Making sure that you're equipped to share your faith with those you spend time with during the week. Responding to requests for help with events. Inviting people to come along to events and courses. Or you could go on a taster day which is taking place in Llangollen on Saturday 3 November. I have few fliers, and I'll put details on the website and FB page.