

**Church of the Ascension, Hilton
Sunday 31 August 2008**

**Vision Update: Presentation on behalf of Parish Council
*[Presented with several overhead transparencies
with key words and phrases]***

Service Intro:

- Greeting
- Opening Hymn

[At the 9am service, the children go to their groups at this point]

Theme Intro:

This morning we will focus on some shared stories relating to vision: Who we are as a worshipping community and setting out some clear directions in response to what we believe is God's leading for our parish.

This is being done with the wholehearted encouragement of our Parish leadership, with the goals of informing you, hopefully inspiring you, and very importantly, asking for your participation in refining or adjusting this shared vision for ministry through Church of the Ascension.

Several weeks ago, our Parish Council met for a Saturday morning to further discern a Vision for Ministry in our Parish. This was a process begun informally in 2004 when we celebrated the Centenary of the founding of this congregation.

Then in 2005, we became more intentional about our parish vision. A parishioner and subsequent member of Parish Council, Karen Weaver, led us through a process that included responses from members of the congregation as well as detailed input from parish leadership. So when Council met recently with Karen to re-look at that, it was done with the hindsight of the past 3 years of implementing that vision. Some of our current parish leadership were part of that earlier process, and some are new to it, providing both a sense of continuity and fresh perspectives.

Intention for today

It is our intention today to look further at our Parish Vision, and for me to propose suggestions about what we do from now onwards. Today's service is also intentionally different, both to make a point about our vision and to create a little extra space to do what we need to without making the service too long.

In a moment we will say a prayer together, followed by the Creed. The prayer is written by Nicolette Hohls, who teaches in the Sunday School and is a member of our Parish Council. She wrote this prayer for the opening of last week's Council meeting. It was very appropriate then, and I wanted to use it this morning:

Prayer written by Nicolette (leaflet – said together)

Dear Heavenly Father

Thank you for the immense comfort and security of being able to call you Father. Thank you for your endless patience, your abundant tolerance and your unfathomable compassion and love for each of us, despite our glaring unworthiness and undeservedness.

Please help us to fulfill your purpose for us as individuals and as a church. Empower us to be salt and light in our community so that all who come into contact with us may see and know the truth about Jesus. Please show us also in a powerful and clear way what your will for our own church is and fill us with a willing and enthusiastic and energetic spirit so that we may fulfill your will.

We pray this in the holy name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

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Now we will say together the Creed, that statement of orthodox Christian belief that the Church has held in common since the Fourth Century:

**Creed** – said together (APB p 108)

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We sit for our Scripture Readings. They will be read without comment in my sermon, but they are the set readings from our Lectionary for Sunday Readings, and have not been altered to suit our theme. In the OT reading, we hear part of the story of the interactions between Moses and God with regard to vision for the Hebrew people. In the NT reading, we hear words of Paul – dense and quite challenging – that are almost “a vision statement for all Christian people”.

OT – Exodus 19: 1-9

NT – Romans 12: 1-13

Gospel – Matthew 16: 21-26

Sermon follows >>>

Sermon:

Didn't we love listening to Ingrid Andersen's sermon last Sunday? Even as she spoke about tough social issues, she did so in a way that was encouraging and positive. If we followed the media, we knew that Pietermaritzburg experienced minimal xenophobia problems even when the rest of the country was at times enflamed, but many did not know that, in part, it was thanks to early intervention by police and NGO personnel, including people representing the churches. But who knew that some refugees from Central Africa were offering to use their considerable skills to train South Africans in much needed skills, also as a way to say "thank you"?

Ingrid spoke with passion and – at the risk of over-using the word today – with vision. She also had a few of us thinking exactly the same thing when she told a story of indignation ending with her marching into the office of the Station Commander at Mountain Rise Police Station to confront him on an issue; I was not the only one thinking at the time, "Heaven help the person on the wrong end of Ingrid's righteous indignation!"☺

But as I listened, and watched Ingrid speak, aware of her passion in her preaching and in the ministry she does, it struck me that that is what we are talking about when we refer to a Parish Vision.

Just as a person can be moved by what they are passionate about, and the work they do can be invigorated by a Godly sense of purpose, so too can a group or a church similarly be inspired and passionate and moved. So too a group can discern its varied God-given gifts and calling, and set to work in using their gifts and fulfilling their calling.

Even people who may be reserved in nature, not given to displays of passion on many subjects, nevertheless will be roused when something captures the imagination – be it a sporting interest, anger at something in the political arena, or enthusiasm for those we love when they excel at something important.

Perhaps you have heard the biblical proverb "Without a vision, the people perish"? We might be tempted to say, "we have a vision, and we are not perishing". However, my response is that we don't want to be self-satisfied or complacent.

Vision – Asking Questions...

Having vision is about many things, including asking the following questions:

- Who are we?
- What is our purpose?
- What are our values?
 - What are the principles, which if everything else were taken away or we were challenged, we would stick to?
- In the light of that, how do we live our personal and family lives?
- How do we organise our community life around those values?
- What do we set out to achieve? What sort of person or community do we want to become? What do we believe God asks of us, even requires of us? [Who we ARE is perhaps the most important, for what we DO will flow out of that!]

For a church, none of this can be an individual matter. It is a corporate activity, requiring prayer, consultation, discernment and reflection.

When we intentionally set out on this process three years ago, as mentioned in the introduction to today's service, this was what we determined:

Core Values:

- We are rooted in the Anglican community
Heritage / sacramental understanding of the Christian faith / Eucharist is central to our worship / yet a great diversity of styles of worship and church practice
- We hold to our traditions and values as expressed through the creeds and sacraments
Our vision statement does not need to highlight lots of individual doctrinal emphases – here they all are, shared in common with other Christians
- We are free to reason and engage in constructive debates around the teachings and interpretations of our faith
We are a thinking people, who see nuances in life and faith, and accept even that asking questions is a part of life for those who believe
- We practise inclusivity, by welcoming all who choose to join us, as an expression of God's unconditional love
This is a tangible expression of grace in community. Even though no church can be "all things to all people", we do not want to exclude anyone who chooses to worship with us, because our understanding of God's love is that it is inclusive, and is made available to all. We want to be welcoming

Our long-term Vision:

To be a vibrant church of choice drawing people from all demographic sectors of the wider community.

Visionary
 Inspired by God
 Bring people in
 Relevant
 Accepting
 Nurturing
 True and consistent

Vibrant entails a tangible element of passion and excitement, a sense of liveliness in a place. [It does not, as one or two people thought, refer to types of music or musical instruments that may or may not be used 😊]

At the centre of all this, is our...

Core Purpose:

Our core purpose as the Parish of the Church of Ascension is to inspire and nurture friendship with God and each other.

It is the Core Purpose that really excites me as a priest. That is what I am passionate about. I enjoy spending time on matters related to it, and am willing to put extra effort into it.

I find it tremendously exciting to see people with a sense of belonging to God – whether it is something experienced for the first time, or in a deeper way, or in people renewing their acquaintance with God after a long silence or even after a sulk on their part, or to know that people are continuing faithfully in their ongoing relationship with Jesus on a daily basis; in all cases, assisted in their worship, informed and inspired by the teaching of this church, supported and encouraged by its pastoral care, helped to go deeper in relationship with God by the ministry of people exercised in this place.

My excitement is in knowing that, in connecting with God and being disciples of Christ, people find meaning and purpose to their often busy and stressful lives. It is in experiencing people using their God-given talents and gifts and resources, in ways that benefit others, build up the community for the good, and bring glory to God. It is in building the church community so that people can relatively comfortably know that they belong, and are welcomed into the congregation, and have a place for some of the most meaningful human transactions.

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When we met to review all of this, acknowledging that we did not want seriously to change any of this, and then looking at specific portfolio areas, we were astounded to see some of the changes from then to now. It would take too long to elaborate on them, and some of them have been talked about before.

They include issues around our worship and music, our financial debts of several years ago, our outreach to other communities much poorer in resources than us, our insufficient building space – for this vision was considered at the time our hall and kitchen were not yet upgraded!

There were low numbers in Sunday School and no Youth Group to speak of, and some families with young children were leaving for other churches in Hilton that offered ministry to families in seemingly bigger and better ways than we did; we wondered if we should even consider appointing a part-time person dedicated to youth work.

Re-looking at all these and more gave us cause to celebrate where we had come from in a relatively short space of time. Of course there were also disappointments, areas where considerable work did not seem to bring much benefit, and some areas where we struggled to find sufficient support or excitement.

But it was good to celebrate our considerable successes – there was a “Wow!” factor in it. And it inspired us: it gave us hope to continue in the same ways, looking to God for guidance in the years to come...

Some of our portfolio areas have not changed much, or have struggled, including in some (but not all) areas of spiritual growth, some (but not all) aspects of our finances, and the need for not being complacent in any area.

**Two new areas of focus:**

We have added two areas of focus:

- The environment – awareness of our God-given responsibilities for all that God has created
- Reaching out more intentionally and specifically to those in the 20-40's age-group, the group most likely to come to church infrequently or even erratically, the age-group most likely to have high stress jobs and children at school and to be handling many issues under pressure. It was strongly felt that people within this age group have not had the focussed attention they have needed, and we purposed to amend this.

We want to grow. We want to ensure that the heritage of faith and resources that current and past generations passed on to us, is able to flourish for the sake of current and future generations. We remembered hearing of how, in 1904, this small community of people undertook to build a church building far bigger than Hilton Road Village needed for itself at that time, but thinking beyond themselves and assuming they would grow, as indeed they eventually did! We want to grow, maintain and develop our personal, spiritual, financial and material resources, so that we can fulfil the vision for ministry that we believe God has given us in this place, for this time.

### **BUZZ FOR 3 – 4 MINUTES**

#### **As yet... Incomplete**

As we conclude, one aspect of all this is incomplete:

We need your feedback on our Parish Vision. We want to know:

- What excites you, or bores you? What do you think is achievable or unachievable? What is missing from our vision?
- What do you look for, in your parish church and from your clergy and other leadership?
- Can you own this vision as yours? i.e. not just that of your well-meaning church council or an eccentric and over-enthusiastic priest!

#### **Church Hall Meetings**

Parish Council joins me in proposing a series of “Church Hall Meetings”, to be held during October at times to enable everybody to get to one. We plan personally to invite every single member of the parish to attend one of these, to give us a chance to elaborate on a few aspects of our vision, but more importantly, to get your comment and input.

Share an hour of your time with us, to comment if you wish to, and also to hear others’ comments, and to join us in building community for the sake of our church.

I am sure that we choose to do more than “just go through the motions” of church – and in saying that, I am not suggesting it is what we have done or are doing. But I am convinced that we want more than just a pretty building in nice surroundings that holds nice services with nice music and a nice sermon and ensures we’ll get a nice baptism for the kids and a nice funeral after we’ve gone!

Your Church Council is convinced that we want a bigger vision, more passionately lived out, than that! And that is what we are proposing today. May God continue to bless us with vision, and wisdom, and open hearts and minds in seeking to know and do God’s will for our vibrant parish. Amen