

Every year each parish in the Church of England has to send in their 'parish returns'. Among other things we have to report the number of new people who have become regular worshippers in the last 12 months. So every vicar in the country has to do a head count and try and remember, if they have not developed a clever way of recording this stuff, who is new to the church.

Some vicars doubt the value of this headcount and wonder whether it makes vicars too target driven so they begin to approach people wondering whether each person they meet will help them to boost their figures.

While I recognise this danger, I also see danger in not bothering to count people at all so that the question 'are we growing?' and 'what might we do differently in order to grow?' is never asked. Even if we remember that God is giving us growth through his Holy Spirit, I think there is value in asking these questions if they help us to discern how the Spirit is moving in our present time and place.

And the Apostles were clearly keeping count. They recorded that there were 120 believers after the Ascension but before Pentecost (Acts 1: 15) and that on the day of Pentecost 3,000 new believers joined the church (Acts 2: 41). In this instance we can see the action of the Holy Spirit in the data!

What did the church do in these heady days after Pentecost? Actually they did plenty. They studied, they enjoyed fellowship together, they shared communion, they prayed, (Acts 2: 42) they shared their wealth so nobody in their community suffered need, (Acts 2: 44) they praised God and enjoyed the goodwill of their neighbours (Acts 2: 47).

This radical wealth sharing seems like a real challenge to the church today. These earliest believers gave up on the whole notion of private property in obedience to the great commandment Jesus had given them and possibly confident that his second coming was imminent. This model of collective living has inspired Christians through the ages, finding expression in the medieval monastic communities and in more modern Christian movements since then.

I'm not sure that the Holy Spirit is moving folks in Alderley Edge to make a commitment to Christian fellowship of quite this magnitude but something is going on. The foodbank has never been so full. Many people are coming

forward to volunteer or to make donations. Our community can see the central role we are playing in this network of mutual giving and receiving. We enjoy the goodwill of our neighbours.

And even though we are physically separated from each other in this unexpected and unprecedented way, our church life is full of vigour. People are circulating these *Thoughts for the Day* and reading their Bibles, in some cases for the first time for a long while. We have newly established prayer groups meeting on line. We are celebrating communion on line with more people participating than used to attend our services physically. And across our congregation people are reaching out to each other, maintaining contact by telephone and offering companionship and support.

In short, just like the earliest Christians in Jerusalem, our faith and our lives are intimately entwined and our collective sense of being a community is growing. People who know us will see the difference to our lives that our faith makes because we are living it. I wonder whether the Lord will add to our number, day by day, those who are being saved.

A Prayer for the Christian Community

Written by Barbara Glasson, President of the Methodist Conference

We are not people of fear: we are people of courage. We are not people who protect our own safety: we are people who protect our neighbours' safety. We are not people of greed: we are people of generosity. We are your people God, giving and loving, wherever we are, whatever it costs, for as long as it takes, wherever you call us. Amen.

Robin