

Minister's Letter March 2018.

At Newport Pagnell URC, as we journey through Lent, we are looking at the fact that there seem to be many people who appreciate Jesus but do not have the same appreciation for Church. (Church here may be the people, the building, the established structure). We came up with words, at our first session, about Jesus and they included: Saviour, love, guide, compassionate, healer, teacher, king, non-judgmental, rebel, light. And then Church: body of Christ, community, life changing, irrelevant, uplifting, judgmental, worship area, fulfilling, hypocritical, old fashioned. And we thought about this and the fact that Jesus can be viewed in a positive light but Church has positive and negative reviews. This is backed up by research and the Barna group concluded that 'Christianity in today's society no longer looks like Jesus.' There is a word being used by those concerned about the decline of mainstream Christianity: 'Churchianity'. It is this form of faith that being is increasingly perceived by those outside the Church- a place where there is less of Jesus Christ and more about the church. What is sad is that this perception means that many people have chosen not to engage with the church, especially those in the 20-40 age group. The URC has had a group looking into this for the past 3 years (the resolution to do so came from URC Youth Assembly). We are fortunate to have had a sneaky peek at what they have discovered and Victoria led the second session looking at this issue. We began by being asked if we felt there was a missing generation in the mainstream denominations- we all agreed there was, in fact, it was felt there are almost two generations missing... and then we were asked why? Ideas included increased social mobility, change of family set ups and employment patterns, no need for church, once leaving home the young people 'lost the habit' of going to church (if they had gone before), and because there was a feeling of church being irrelevant. Much of the research done backs all this up.

It was the institutional church that is the issue as there appears to be some preconceptions: Church is for Christians. Sounds sensible, but if you are not a Christian, then the feeling is that you cannot go! Or you may not be welcome/ good enough/ fit in? And if that is the case, where do you go to ask questions? Because the church is full of people who already have the answers... (this is the perception from outside the church). And the other assumption is that you need to believe before you can go to church. We, in churches, have failed to share with the world exactly what it is we believe and why it means so much to us and what it can mean for others. I am not saying that we are not trying to do this; I am saying that we are not succeeding in whatever it is we are saying. People beyond the church seem to have a more benevolent attitude to Jesus- he was, in December 2013, top of the list in the 10 most significant people in human history; they have a less benevolent attitude to the church- our churches do not look like the Jesus shaped places people expect them to be. Our words and our actions do not match up and people hear more about rotas than repentance, more about committees than commitment and more about finance than faith.

Over the coming weeks we are looking at what implications this has on the institutional church and for us as part of mainstream denominations that are declining. We do realise that often the church is out of sync with the world and that this 'quick fix' and 'want it now' sort of attitude we see in the younger generations can mean that the slow burn, 'growing into it' nature of our worship and church life can fail to attract them. However, we do need to be better at sharing with the world what it is we actually believe and why and why it is important and what a difference it makes to our lives AND can to theirs too. And that is where many of us struggle. Can we articulate why our faith is important? What we believe? This year the United Area is encouraging us to take part in Holy Habits groups. Holy Habits is something both the Methodist and United Reformed Churches are focusing on as they encourage us to walk the walk and develop as missional disciples.

We are journeying through Lent to Easter, that ultimate time of God's revelation of LOVE. How shall we share it? With chocolates and bonnets or with honest doubt, questions and conversations and allowing for God's transformational presence to do the rest? It's our call. The future of the church is in our hands- how will we respond? How will we allow Jesus to be seen and experienced? How will we welcome and include?

Good job we still have 4 weeks of Lent left... Blessings, Jenny.