

# Growth Communities

## Building Community. Growing Disciples

### Introduction

The last eighteen months has seen the most serious disruption to our church life in living memory as a result of the Pandemic and associated lockdowns. Although, the lockdowns now seem to be over, the Pandemic is still around and the ongoing effects are still impacting our community life together.

In Ramsgate, there has been the added dimension of churches coming together in partnership. In May 2021, the vicar of St. Luke's was also appointed as Priest in Charge of St. George's. Also, that Spring the incumbent of Christ Church retired and the majority of that church's congregation left the Church of England to form a new church in another denomination. However, there is a significant group of people still at Christ Church who have been meeting on Sundays at the church. They have now formed a new PCC which is seeking to discern the church's future.

All three churches were invited to join together in three sessions in October 2021 called, *More than Sunday*. The first session gave each church a chance to share their stories with others. In the middle session we looked at the vision and values of the early church and considered how well our churches worked out those values today. In the last session, Paul, the vicar presented a vision for a new way of structuring church life called, *Growth Communities*.

The purpose of this document is to begin to flesh out that vision in greater detail in order to have a more detailed discussion of what it might look like and how it may be implemented in the present context.

### Vision and Values

Put simply the aim of Growth Communities is to build community and grow disciples. There are key Biblical mandates to do both these things.

Jesus's last words in Matthew's gospel include the key command to 'Make disciples of all nations.' Jesus's goal for the church was to grow in such a way that increasing numbers of people chose to follow Jesus so that they could learn to become more like Jesus. A disciple is like an apprentice, someone learning from a master as they seek to carry out their work. As Christians we live out our Christian lives, guided by our master, Jesus. Disciples grow as we learn to **pray** to our heavenly Father (e.g. Luke 11:1-4), to **care** for one another as Christ cared for us (e.g. John 13:34-35) and to **share** the truth of God's word (e.g. Colossians 3:16 and 1 Peter 3:15).



**PRAYER**



**CARE**



**SHARE**

Although we live in an increasingly individualistic society, where many treat religious faith as a private matter, Jesus does not call us to be Christians in isolation. He calls us to be part of a family with many new brothers and sisters (Mark 10:30). The picture of the early church in Acts 2:42-47 shows a community of disciples that met together and ate together daily. They shared their possessions with one another so that no-one was in need. Together as a community they were devoted to praying to their heavenly Father, caring for one another and sharing the truth of God's word as Christ's apostles taught it.

These activities of praying, caring and sharing God's word are the key activities of discipleship. These are the ways that we grow as disciples and build community.

## Divided by Focus

In looking to build community there the way we organise ourselves needs to be structured to enable deeper supportive relationships to grow in a busy world. The suggestion of Growth Communities is that smaller communities in the life of the church in central Ramsgate are formed around the focal activity of that community.

Since, the congregations of St. George's and Christ Church are both relatively small, they would naturally form their own Growth Communities, whilst the proposal is that St. Luke's is split into three Growth Communities around three areas of activity or service: Community Engagement, Children and Youth work and Creativity.



**St. George's** has a unique focus around its own buildings and activities, including the 9:30am Eucharist, 10:45am Sunday School, the Tuesday morning coffee morning and the Community Meal on Tuesday evenings.

The situation of **Christ Church** is more uncertain. If the buildings continue to be used for regular or occasional services, for school services and the toddler group, then these activities create a natural focus. If the building and services at Christ Church are discontinued, then it would still be good for a Christ Church community to work at providing some kind of mission or outreach to that part of Ramsgate, perhaps linked with the school or in the harbour with the Sailor's church.

**Community Engagement** at St. Luke's. In the last year a group has formed at St. Luke's to consider how to engage more effectively with our community. Out of this *Cafe4All* was launched on Thursday mornings in St. Luke's church in the autumn. This also helped provide improved hospitality during and after our Sunday services, when refreshments were able to restart. These activities have become the focus for a number of people at St. Luke's working together, so it seems natural for this to form the core of one of St. Luke's Growth Communities.

**Children and Youth** at St. Luke's. There is a dedicated team of people at St. Luke's who have worked together to help ensure that the Children's and Youth work could restart during the Sunday morning service. These people have to work together, so again it is natural that they form the core of one of the Growth Communities.

**Creativity** at St. Luke's. During the last lockdown a new music group began to meet and plan and are now leading our music and singing in services at St. Luke's. This has incorporated members of the previous singing group, but also enabled new people to join in and a much greater use of live instruments. Once again these activities involve working together, so it seems appropriate that they form a core of one of the Growth Communities.

## United by Values

So, each Growth Community will have its own focus and distinctives. Nonetheless, they will share much in common and be united by the vision and values that we have already discussed around building community and growing disciples.

Thus, the vision for each Growth Community will not be merely about their mission or focus. There will also be work to ensure that the wider membership of the Growth Community are prayed for, cared for and have opportunities to grow in discipleship themselves. This will involve arranging meetings for people to come together to study the Bible, either in regular groups, courses or one to one. It will mean keeping in touch with those on the fringe to ensure they are not forgotten and arranging social gatherings to try and create a greater sense of community. It will also have a focus on local and worldwide mission to help enable a wider outlook on God's mission to the world.

## Supporting Each Other

One of the positives about the *More than Sunday* sessions was a real sense of coming together. Although, it is important to divide up people into smaller groups to enable more meaningful relationships and community, we need to also work at drawing the different Growth Communities together. There are three ways this can happen.

### Termly Prayer Gatherings

It would be good to arrange a prayer gathering once a term, where people from each of the Growth Communities can come together to hear and pray for one another. These could be on a Monday evening and a Tuesday morning in the same manner as *More than Sunday* was.

### Large Social Gatherings

Another way of encouraging a sense of wider unity is for each Growth Community to put on a big social event once a year (or every other year) for members of all the Growth Communities to be invited to.

### Leaders Working Together

In the next section we will consider the leadership roles needed for Growth Communities. It will be important for these leaders to meet with each other from across the Growth Communities to offer mutual support and for training.

# Opportunity not Obligation

The plan will be that everyone who is a member of each of the churches will be allocated a Growth Community. People will be free to move from one Growth Community to another if they wish to. Being allocated to a Growth Community requires no obligation, but means that the Growth Community they are a member of will offer them:

- a. Occasions to meet with others and make friends
- b. Prayer and support from the community
- c. Courses or groups to help them explore or grow in discipleship
- d. Opportunities to serve as part of the Growth Communities focus.
- e. Chances to learn about the wider mission of the church

# Levels of Involvement

In practice most Growth Communities will consist of members with differing levels of involvement:

## Associated

That is technically a member, but never taking up any of the opportunities offered.

## Connected

These will be people, who attend some of the occasions organised and accept some kind of prayer and support from the Growth Community (see a. and b. above), but are not actively seeking opportunities to grow as a disciple or serve (see c. and d. above).

## Engaged

This is those who are eager to take up most or all that is offered them as part by the Growth Community including attending small groups or courses and serving in the area of focus. The more people that are engaged the more effective the Growth Community will be.

## Leadership

The plan is for a core team of 5 people with distinctive roles to work together to lead the Growth Community. One of these 5 will be appointed overall leader, but the focus should be on team leadership. The overall leader could be someone in any of the 5 roles and would be the key link person with the vicar.

The five leadership roles are linked to the opportunities a. to e. listed above. They would be:

- a. **Community Development.** Pulling together teams of people from the Growth Community to organise the social occasions where people can gather and get to know each other. This will include the annual social event organised for the wider church community and two to four other events a year, possibly including one especially for people new to the Growth Community. The aim of these events would be to move people from being associated to connected.
- b. **Prayer and Support.** This is more of a pastoral role. It involves leading a small team to ensure that individuals are kept in contact with and offered prayer and support. It may include keeping



an eye on people's church attendance and contacting each member every now and then, especially if they have not been to church in order to check they are alright and ensure they are not forgotten. This role may mean being given access to people's contact details and so would need training on data protection.

- c. **Discipleship Growth.** This person would take the lead in ensuring that there were small groups or courses for people to attend or meet at for Bible Study and support in their discipleship. They may lead a group or courses or may work with others to do the same. They will also work in partnership with the clergy in this role.
- d. **Focal Service.** This will be the person who co-ordinates people's engagement or involvement with the focal area of service of the Growth Community. This may include managing rotas, developing role descriptions and working with others to ensure that things are being improved.
- e. **Wider Mission.** This role is to be the link person between the Growth Community and a local and world mission link. Local mission links could include the Winter Shelter or ACTS schools work and World Mission links could include Tear Fund or an overseas mission partner. The role will involve encouraging prayer and ensuring that information about the mission links is passed on when appropriate.

## How do Growth Communities fit with everything else?

Although, for many members of the churches, they will be the main part of church life other than Sunday Service attendance, Growth Communities will not encompass the whole activity of church life. They will sit alongside the important administrative, governance and financial structures of the church, which will continue to be run by the PCCs, wardens and staff.

Some functions of the Growth Communities will help to enable the main Sunday Services. For example, the St. Luke's Growth Communities all contribute an area of service to enable the main Sunday service:

- Creativity - the music (and audio-visual desk),
- Children and Youth – the children's groups on a Sunday morning
- Community – the host teams

The clergy role will be to support, train and equip the leadership teams in the different Growth Communities. The shared values, vision and leadership structures across the different Growth Communities will enable the clergy to be able to resource the different leadership teams most efficiently. In particular, the clergy can offer support in terms of courses being run in the groups.

## Conclusion

There is still a way to go to implement this vision. Most importantly is the need to begin to build the leadership teams for each Growth Community. The hope is that once these teams are up and running they will help to make the churches in central Ramsgate a place where many different kinds of people become and grow as disciples of Christ and find their place in caring and active communities.