



Suzanne Evans's

PARISH PROFILE

St Mark's Battersea

"Come to our weekly staff lunch. You'll get a flavour of what we're about."



It seemed a straightforward invitation from Vicar, Paul Perkin, but ended up challenging my assumptions. I'd not expected to find twenty-two staff members seated around a table so huge it would not have looked out of place in the giant's hall in Jack and the Beanstalk. "Actually, we're rather sparse today," I was told. "Quite a few of us are on holiday."

So what kind of a church needs two-dozen people to keep it running? One that is run like clockwork; provides exceptional pastoral care; accepts every evangelical opportunity and ministers to 500 worshippers every Sunday, that's what kind. Ten staff members are full time paid staff, another seven work part time and others are associate staff members - paid for by a trust, charity or specific fundraising appeal.

That the staff work together and value team support was obvious during lunch. After chatter over salad, cheese, ham and fruit, prayers followed in response to specific requests for help, support or encouragement. Paul then suggested what he called a 'Russian prayer,' involving everyone standing in a circle, placing one hand on the shoulder of the person to their right and praying personally for the person they are touching for one minute, before swapping hands and shoulders for the person on their left and doing the same again. Being the kind of liberal Anglican who rarely prays with anyone outside of

services and who tends not to pray in a conventionally evangelical way, I felt rather chucked in at the deep end, but it's always a privilege to be prayed for - even if you're busy trying to pray for a complete stranger at the same time!

Paul Perkin describes his church as 'Charismatic.' Having had a damaging experience with a rabidly charismatic church in my teens, I've tried to avoid charismatic churches ever since and went to St Mark's on Sunday morning with some trepidation, thereby handing Mr Perkin another of my assumptions to challenge. There was no speaking in tongues, no interpretation, no prophecy, no healing, no miracles - not even that much hand waving.

"We believe in many of the things that you would identify with charismatic services - the gift of healing, for instance," explained Paul afterwards, "but it's not really seen on Sunday mornings in family service because we are sensitive to the fact that we have many different people coming from many different places and not everyone will find it comfortable. We're more relaxed in the evening service - with mostly young, single people - but still no excesses!"

The only giveaways to the charismatic nature of worship at St Mark's in the morning was the music - choruses and a highly competent band comprising vocals, keyboards, violin, guitar, drums and tambourine - the firmly Bible-based nature of Paul's sermon - a thorough exposition of Psalm 27 - the absence of vestments and the opportunity for anyone in the congregation to 'share' what the Lord was doing in their life, with responses that were clearly evangelical and focused on Christianity as the only valid way to God.

Interestingly, Paul categorises this sharing as: "prophecy delivered in a very low key way. The 'do you have anything to share?' approach is the way of opening the door. We encourage

people to be tentative and provisional and say something like this rather than take a 'Thus Saith The Lord' approach."

The existence of St Mark's is in itself visionary. Seventeen years ago the church was due to be made redundant but Holy Trinity Brompton, in response to calls by fifty or so members who lived in Battersea for their own Church, helped rescued it from oblivion. Paul Perkin, then Hospital Chaplain at the Brompton Hospital agreed to take over the vacant living. Arriving, on the first of five motorbikes he's owned since taking up the post, he found just twenty mostly elderly congregants and a building that was falling down.

Today, the church is clearly thriving, "even though part of it is still falling down!" exclaims Paul. "The building is always a challenge. We're having to spend around £100,000 stopping it slipping down the hill. And we want to raise the remaining £200,000 of the £2million we need to re-build the church hall to improve our ministry and outreach."

"One of our primary concerns here is to help people cope with pressures on family life," adds his wife, Christine. "Many people in this area are hard-working professionals and that brings a specific set of pressures to bear on marriages and families. We need better facilities to do all we want to."

Being in charge of 'Family Life Ministries,' Christine is ultimately responsible for anything from a church weekend away to running the dozen or so different women's groups.

"We have Marriage Preparation Courses that serve the wider community and attract as many couples from outside St Mark's as from inside - twenty-five couples last time. We advertise them in the local fitness club, library, doctor's surgeries and the registry office. Then, for couples already married we have 'The Marriage Course.' This is a



Young people at Sunday morning worship

'6,000-mile service' for any marriage - not just those in trouble. Our Parenting Teenagers' course is also proving popular - we're hoping to advertise it in schools - and we're about to set up a Family Life course. We also offer post-natal depression counselling."

Phew. Exhausting just thinking about it all. But there's much more. Geoff Rowland, a trained counsellor and Southwark Pastoral Auxiliary, helps run the Wandsworth Mediation Service - a Christian initiative now linked to the borough and able to deal with any kind of conflict - neighbour disputes, victim/offender mediation, legal and workplace mediation, etc.

The church is a key supporter of the South London 'Just 10' tent mission; runs debt counselling through the action group Christians Against Poverty and offers practical help to those in need through the 'Besom' project.

There's always work with the 150 children to be done, plus various missionary and youth projects, social events (including a men's and women's football teams) and prayer ministries, to mention but a few other initiatives. There are so many major projects going on that St Mark's appointed Dave Bull as

full time Operations Director to oversee it all. He manages the staff team, recruitment, communications, IT, and the 300 plus people who volunteer in different capacities.

St Mark's offers so much in terms of resources partly because of Gifts and Ministries Co-ordinator, Julian Churcher. It's his job to help members of the congregation find out what role they can play in the core philosophy of 'every member ministry at St Mark's. "Of course," he admits, "there are always people doing more than they should and some who are not doing enough! I pray with people, ask about their visions, encourage people to have a go at things and to move on if it doesn't work out."

Both Paul and his wife Christine value the freedom they have to work in a church in a city environment, where they don't have to cater to all tastes. "Here," enthuses Christine, "we can just go with what we believe God wants, though of course we are aware of who our congregation is. We're characterised as being a yuppie, middle class church but actually are a far more diverse mixture than most people would give us credit for."

The most obvious example of this diversity assembles halfway down the nave during family services. Two rows of solid looking men in scruffy jeans and trainers, mostly unshaven, provide an extraordinary contrast to other mostly middle class professional men in chinos, brogues, and

blazers and without a whisper of whisker. Jill Furlonger explains they are from Stepping Stones, one of three local houses for ex-offenders, taken straight from prison or rehab. Paul Perkin is one of the trustees and Chaplain to the project and St Mark's provides a unique Christian element to fulfil the Stepping Stones' motto of 'a home, a job and a church. "Basically, these are guys looking for spiritual as well as practical support. We mentor and work with them until they are ready to move on and start life again on their own."

Former crane-driver Bob Humphries promotes Stepping Stones through his work as Wandsworth Prison Missioner. Running two Alpha courses in the prison - one on main wing and one on the vulnerable persons' wing with mainly sex offenders, he says: "you don't have to tell a prisoner he's a sinner; he knows it."

"They're all looking for a way out of crime. We need more churches that can handle prisoners when they come out. They're on a high with their faith and release, and if they go into a church that doesn't understand, they plunge back into the depths of despair and get very angry."

Jamie has a history of drug and alcohol abuse, yet is getting back on track working voluntarily two days a week at Trinity Hospice. He's eventually hoping to be able to apply for a job as a healthcare assistant. He's a credit not just to Stepping Stones but also to St Mark's and the pastoral care it has given him: "I've been a Christian for ten years - getting born again the first time I was in rehab - and only wanted Christian help this time out," he insists.

"As soon as I turn my back on Jesus I collapse. I did it once for three years and got back on the drugs and the booze, in trouble with the police and my family and lost it. Now my mum and sister are born again too. I'm not a fanatic, I'm just someone who has tried it and knows that it works. I'm living proof that Jesus Saves."

For further information see www.stmarks-battersea.org.uk

Paul Perkins



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