

I'm not a great one for anniversaries - ask my wife!

But a few months ago I realized that this Sunday would be the 10th anniversary of the coming together of St Frideswyde's Church and All Saints Church.

On this Sunday, 10 years ago, we held our last service at St Frides, up in Thornton
Then we closed the doors of the church, got in our cars and came here to All Saints for our first fully joint service.

The legal ramifications took 5 more months to complete, but the real merger took place on that day.

So I suggested to Kath that we should mark the anniversary in some way

She said "certainly! Why don't you do the talk that day -

And offer some reflections on what we did 10 years ago – and our journey since."

That will teach me to keep my mouth shut!

But it *is* a story worth telling -

Not least because lots of people have joined ASSF since the merger

And may not know what happened and why.

And even for those who were there at the time it's good to remember and to thank God for leading us on this journey

And maybe there are some lessons that we can learn for our future together.

So I accepted Kath's challenge and hope you'll bear with me as I share the story.

I hope you'll bear with me particularly because I'm going to tell it from the point of view of St Frides

I had, after all, been part of that church for 35 years

The people of All Saints have a different story, I know, even though the endings of the two stories are the same.

For St Frides, it all began in about 2006 when we decided that we needed to do something radical with our buildings..

The felt roof of the main church building was riddled with holes

And the timber frame of the hall was rotting.

Both needed major expenditure – well beyond our financial means.

But the church site was much bigger than we needed

So we hit on the idea of demolishing both our buildings,

selling off 2/3rds of the land to a housing developer,

and, with the proceeds, building a new church on the remaining 1/3rd of the land.

It was exciting!

We appointed architects and other professionals,

We went through a full design process
We marketed the spare land and got a very good offer from McCarthy and Stone – the retirement homes specialists
All was looking good!

Then came the financial crash of 2008

McCarthy and Stone drastically reduced their offer
And the whole project no longer stacked up financially.

At the same time we began to wonder, even if we could make the figures stack up, would it really be right to spend all that money on a new church?

We had to face up to the fact that we were an increasingly elderly congregation.
Of course we believed in a God of miracles
But, humanly speaking, we'd really gone beyond the tipping point and were facing quite rapid decline.

So we decided to abandon our big plans and seek a merger with another church

The obvious choice would have been St Helens, Sefton – we were already joined in a united benefice with them.
But the two churches were so different that we couldn't see a merger working.
We knew hardly anything about our neighbouring church in Forefield Lane, but even so, we felt that All Saints might be a better fit.
So Irene Cowell, our vicar, went to float the idea with the All Saints PCC

She reported back that it was warmly received.

So, a joint working group was set up to look in detail at what would be involved in making the merger work.

Meanwhile, at St Frides, we pressed ahead with the sale of the whole church site.
We saw that the proceeds would be a sort of dowry for us to take forward to All Saints.

Looking back, it was a marriage made in heaven!
St Frides brought this large dowry and a small group of people – only 4 of whom are still with us
All Saints brought a much larger congregation with quite a lot more going on but the church had been struggling for too long without a vicar
And had a rather tired set of buildings.

Not all mergers are successful
But this one was.
Not least, I think, because it was something that we locally chose to do –
Rather than having it imposed on us.

The people of St Frides were warmly welcomed here
The working group had put in place the right arrangements
And we began to work together as one body
Never, in the 10 years since, have I heard any hint of regret or resentment

A few months after the merger Kath was appointed as the first vicar of the merged church
The proceeds of the St Frides land sale made possible our major building project.
And so began the journey that brought us to where we are today
A journey that we are all now part of.

But Kath had in mind that I shouldn't just tell this story
But should offer some reflections on what we can learn, or have learned, from the
journey we've been on.

There are some interesting questions we could ask.

What about all the work we did at St Frides early on in the process -
appointing architects and so on?
Was all that effort wasted?

If we had prayed more persistently,
or listened for God's guidance more carefully,
could we have saved all that time and energy and money?

But I don't think we're called to ask those sort of 'what if' questions -
either as a church or as individuals.
If we did get things wrong God is greater than our mistakes.
Our calling is not to agonise over what has passed but to respond to Him from where we
are now.

So rather than ask 'what can we **learn** from the journey we've been on?' I'd like to ask
what may be a more challenging question:
'How should we **respond** to the story?'

And I'd like to suggest four ways in which we should respond.

Firstly, I'm sure that we should respond with **thankfulness to God** for his **faithfulness
in the past**

Thankfulness to God for steering us away from our mistaken ideas of how things might
be.

Thankfulness for bringing Kath to us to lead us so well to where we are today

Thankfulness for all that we've been able to do in 10 years

And for bringing us to a good place that none of us had imagined.

Secondly, we should respond with **trust in God for the future**

The future is, of course, uncertain

But we can rely on the God who has brought us this far.

Like the farmer in Jesus' parable, we must do what we can do,
but the growth of the Kingdom of God here will be His doing.

We can trust Him!

Thirdly, in response to our story over these past years we should **be open to being led
into new ways**

The growth of the Kingdom here may be quite different from what we imagined.

As Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians – "The old has gone, the new is here!"

He was writing about individuals: "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come".
But the same surely applies to the church as a whole.

We've been seeing some new ways as we've responded to the pandemic.
The challenge now is to make the most of those,
not to try and get back to exactly where we were before.
And to remain open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

And finally, we should expect to be **amazed by what God will do among us**.
Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed
The tiniest of all seeds
And yet it becomes the largest of all garden plants.
God has led us already to a place that has far exceeded any of our imaginations.
And we should expect to be amazed at what God does next!

So as we look back over the past 10 years
And look forward to a new chapter in our story shortly to begin,
let's do it:
with thankfulness for God's **faithfulness in the past**
with **trust in God for the future**
open to being led into new ways
and **expecting to be amazed by what God will do among us**.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Andrew Thompson-Smith