

Church Times (Letters to the Editor, Friday 26th May 2017)

Church-plant that swept away a congregation and its liturgical life

Rebranded: St Thomas's, Heigham, in Norwich, now advertised as "STN Earlham Road" during a metamorphosis that is said to have left members of the congregation that existed before in tears



From Judith and David Paston

Sir, — Church-plants (Features, 21 April) are not always painless or positive for all. St Thomas's, Heigham, in Norwich, became a plant four years ago. This is how it happened.

It was a middle-of-the-road traditional Victorian church, in a suburb of the cathedral city. It had had a robed choir and organist for more than 100 years, and a strong Anglican musical tradition. The electoral roll was about 100. The average attendance at the *Common Worship* eucharist at 10.30 a.m. was about 50. There were two other services: BCP communion at 8 a.m., and sung evensong at 6.30 p.m. — sparsely attended but greatly valued by those who did attend.

There was a problem paying the Parish Share in full, as it had much increased over several years, but there was no problem with the enthusiasm, dedication, loyalty, and faith of the congregation. Many money-raising events also brought in the wider community: Christmas and spring fairs and jumble sales, coffee mornings, and Christian Aid collections, among others.

After a sudden bereavement in 2012, the Vicar at that time was advised to exercise ministry elsewhere, and the living was suspended by the Bishop. Enter the next Priest-in-Charge in 2013: a curate from HTB, who stated that he had a mandate from the Bishop to change and improve, and encourage growth, and with it attendant giving.

The initial expression of this was to move the choral eucharist to 9.30 a.m. This was to give time for some supporters from London to get to a new informal service at 11. Many PCC members were against this, but were overruled, and the Priest-in-Charge said that he would accept only unanimous agreement in favour. When it was suggested at the PCC that a “plant” was taking place, it was vehemently denied. This denial was untrue, as has been admitted in your article.

The move to 9.30 was extremely inconvenient for many of the existing congregation, some elderly people, and members living outside the parish. It went ahead, however. Large screens were introduced, and hymn books and service sheets were discouraged. Many elderly people could not see the screens well enough to read them.

As time went on, the parish magazine was discontinued: it was said that the website was where people should go for information, and listen to recordings of recent sermons; but many do not own computers or smartphones.

The robed choir was gradually undermined. Evensong was changed from 6.30 to 4.30 to accommodate a service at 7 p.m. for students and young people. Several choir members and the organist of nearly 20 years left, with much heart-searching and sadness. This organist and choirmaster had been dedicated and faithful, responsible for choir practice and two choral services every week, and organising many concerts; several famous organists had given recitals on the fine organ. There had also been a link with a rural-benefice choir, and an exchange of services twice a year. The choir was moved out of its vestry without any discussion or warning: the room was needed as an office.

A new organist and choirmaster was appointed. Not long after this, evensong became a once-a-month service, and the organ was needed at only three 9.30 services a month, a music group taking its place at the fourth. Eventually, the new music director left, after the eight services a month which he had been appointed to play for were reduced to four. Evensong was abolished: it was said to be not “missional” enough, and the congregation was too small.

The choir and two volunteer organists were required at only two services a month. More choir members left. A new music director (not an organist) was appointed with no experience of traditional church music. The choir members were told not to robe, to stand on the new stage that had been built over and extending the chancel steps, and to wear black and white — this at the *Common Worship* 9.30 a.m. eucharist. The pulpit, lectern, clergy stalls, and screen were removed. The pews were sold. There was even talk of removing the font. Most of the original choir had left.

The parish hall had been let to various non-church groups: in fact, it had been a stipulation that it should be used by the wider community when grants from secular bodies were given for its refurbishment after a disastrous fire in 1997. Very few non-church groups use it now, after charges for non-church groups were significantly increased.

It has been stated that the congregation has increased by eight or nine times. This is probably true: some of them are students, but many have come from other churches. Some local clergy have expressed disappointment that a number of their congregation left for St Thomas's.

Many of the original congregation have left, including two Readers, some to other more traditional churches or the cathedral, but some to no church. Some elderly people in the parish and beyond have become unchurched in their old age, to their great distress.

All this has come at great cost and heartache to the original congregation. Of course, a lot of money is involved: a very expensive sound system, screens, computers, and many paid staff, who have evidently come from other churches.

Obviously, it has not been possible to keep faithfully to different traditions in the same church. Although "*Common Worship Eucharist*" continues at 9.30, it has no procession, no robed choir or clergy, some of the liturgy is missed out, hymns and organ are used at only two services a month, and the communion is administered sometimes by lay people who do not have the permission of the Bishop. Apparently "anybody" can do it, and take communion to people's homes.

To plant a church into a building that has become redundant, or has an extremely small congregation, is one thing, but to impose a different tradition of worship, priesthood, and even theology on an existing 50-plus congregation, many of whom had worshipped and served there for 30 to 40 years, or their whole lives, causes sadness and even heartbreak. Many were in tears that their spiritual home was no longer there, and they felt adrift.

Fortunately, some of the original choir have joined the choir in a neighbouring parish, and have found a warm welcome. Others have joined that congregation, too. They are happy that they can celebrate the seasons and festivals of the Church again, such as Advent, Epiphany, Candlemas, and even Ascension, which had not been recognised in the "new" St Thomas's, and can worship in the tradition to which they have been accustomed.

Owing to lack of transport, however, that choice is not open to all. The ministry specifically to older people at St Thomas's seems to be limited to a fortnightly lunch club (which has existed for 30 years), with no other afternoon meetings. The many evening meetings (Connect groups), scattered over the parish and in satellites far afield, are for those who have transport, and are aimed at younger people.

Two more churches in the neighbourhood have been or are being "planted" by St Thomas's. One, St Alban's, has become a café church, leaving that parish without a real parish church, and no traditional or *Common Worship* services. The other, St Barnabas's, has only just been taken over. It has a liturgical Catholic tradition with a small congregation; it remains to be seen what will happen there. There are now four stipendiary clergy in the extended parish of St Thomas's, Norwich (no longer

Heigham), now expecting to be known as STN Earlham Road and STN Grove Walk (formerly St Alban's)

The Vicar of St Peter's, Brighton, the Revd Archie Coates, was quoted (Features, 21 April) as saying that Holy Trinity, Brompton, hadn't "always got it right"; and he believed that it was better to have a model of partnership rather than planting, which recognised the need to "keep the identity of the church that we partner with". Is the story of St Thomas's, Heigham, an example of not getting it right, and effectively destroying its existing identity, and alienating many of its original former faithful congregation?

Of course, there has been a significant increase in the congregation, large financial gains, and prizes for the website, all proudly proclaimed by clergy and people. It seems, however, that there is little to be proud of in the insensitive and even cruel way in which this plant was carried out. May it not happen like this again.

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