



# **A REPORT FOR HOLY TRINITY, PRESTWOOD ABOUT ITS INTERVIEWS ON CONGREGATIONAL MISSION AND MINISTRY**

from

**The Congregational Discovery Reading Team**

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## **How to Use this Report**

This report gives the major findings of a self-study by members of the congregation about the character of worship, education, and general involvement of members, as well as the congregation's responses to community and congregational changes. It is based on 24 interviews, gathered in summer, 2018, by several members of the congregation.

We believe these findings should be taken seriously even though they are based on information from a moderate number of interviews. Leaders should consider their own reflections and use common sense about the issues raised in this report, building on the strengths of Holy Trinity while addressing problem areas as opportunities for further growth as a congregation.

We believe that both the interviewers and those with whom they talked have the best interests of Holy Trinity at heart and gave information they hope will help the congregation.

Our recommendations are meant as questions, not to tell the congregation what to do. We believe that your congregation's continuing work in mission, particularly with the Partnership for Missional Church, may help it address some of the opportunities discovered in these interviews. We also believe the congregation's leadership has the wisdom and ability to best address its own situation.

All of the people who took time to answer these interview questions, and most certainly the Listening Leaders who did so many splendid interviews, should be commended for their willingness to think seriously about your congregation's members' past and present experiences of worship, learning, change, and mission. Such careful and helpful work will be of dramatic value as we all consider what God is up to in the community and what God is calling Holy Trinity to do here. As we seek to build on strengths, we remember that God equips us for every good work and that we lead by the grace of God's gifts to us.

## Question 1: Tell a story about how you sense God's presence and activity in this congregation:

24 interviews, 58 remarks

### How do you sense God's presence and activity? (23 remarks)

Interaction with others – 5

Support in crises and illness - 2

**Mentioned once each:** warm feeling; memorable events; familiarity; celebration; joy; lifted to God; thinking through God's impact on our lives; full of love; enormous happiness ("I could have cried"); feeling God's presence; in committed people; "feel like I'm going to do something"; sense of God'; "hidden & huge faith"; want more time to express it; history of prayer.

### Where do you sense God's presence and activity? (35 remarks)

People's behaviour and support – 10

Music – 4

Communion - 3

Building – 2

Peace – 2

Not in services or congregation - 3

**Mentioned once each:** Lighthouse; choir; after service coffee; intercessions; Christmas/Easter services; teaching; reordering; blessing; small groups; talking about faith; ordination service

### Observations and recommended questions to consider:

- **Observations:** More respondents mentioned places where and occasions when they sense God's presence and activity (37 remarks) than identified the emotions and feelings involved (23 remarks). Where people did articulate how they experience God's presence and activity, the emotions and feelings are all positive, being expressed with words like 'warmth', 'joy', 'love', 'happiness', being 'lifted to God'. Some people experience God when connecting with other people (10 remarks); for others the emotions and occasions are highly personal. You seem to be, as one respondent states, a church of "huge and hidden" faith.

**Questions:** Do you think people at Holy Trinity find it hard to talk about their sense of God? How might you enable more people to be able to articulate their personal experience of God's presence and activity? In what ways might you build on people's sense of God's presence and activity to strengthen people's faith and grow the church?

- **Observations:** A lot of the where and how people experience God is in each other (17). This seems to indicate that your living out of faith, the tangible kindness of another human being is a way your church excels in and that it is a way which people recognise as a "God" activity.

**Questions:** How can you foster the personal experience of God more? How might you use the human interaction to help facilitate deeper engagement with God himself (where two or three are gathered in my name)?

- **Observations:** Three people identified that they either did *not* sense God's presence and activity in Holy Trinity, or didn't feel the need to attend services to do so. While two of these respondents come, perhaps more predictably, from people on the fringe of Holy Trinity, one of the responses is from a congregation member.

**Questions:** While it's risky to read too much into a single response, I wonder how open people within the congregation feel they can be about their struggles and doubts? How might you create stronger relationships of trust within the congregation to enable people to discuss their personal experience of faith more openly? How might creating such a safe and trusting environment enable you to connect better with people on the fringe of the church?

## Question 2: Describe an experience of profound worship you have had:

22 interviews, 62 remarks

### Describe the experience (30 remarks)

After illness/difficult times – 4

Sermons – 3

Special services – 3

Other places - 3

Weddings – 2

Family/friends funerals – 2

Hymns – 3 (especially “In Christ alone” x2)

Not in this congregation – 2

**Mentioned once each:** music; in the church building; remembering deceased loved ones; Wednesday service; baptisms; church anniversary; training for confirmation; in larger congregations.

### Feelings experienced: (33 remarks)

Special – 2

Strong comfort – 2

Very moving – 3

Faith – 3

Lifted up/supported - 3

**Mentioned once each:** included; encouragement; very emotional; remembering; joyful music; deep impression; warmth; happy; joyous; wonderful; awareness of [God’s] sacrifice; sense of a guardian angel; “something wrapping itself around me”; profound experiences; powerful; rewarding; thought provoking; recognised Holy Spirit breaking through; faith story “fills my head”; feeling God’s help.

### Observations and recommended questions to consider:

- **Observations:** We noticed that 22 out of 24 respondents were able to identify and articulate an experience of profound worship, some very distinctive and memorable. What a story to share!

**Questions:** Is this what you would expect? What does this tell you about the people with whom you have contact? What opportunities can you find for people to share their individual experiences of worship and the divine – to find the language to talk about God in public?

- **Observations:** For a number of respondents the experience was linked to a personal connection (family wedding, funeral, difficult time etc).

**Questions:** How does this knowledge help you in how you approach people facing defining moments – both good and bad? How can those moments be turned from a personal celebration or tragic experience to an experience of God?

- **Observations:** We also noticed that of the 5 responses to this question from regular congregation members, 2 people identified profound worship services in special/festival services on Holy Trinity and 3 respondents stated that their experiences had happened in other places. One response, from a man in his 70s, suggested that “Holy Spirit should be allowed MORE into our worship.”

**Questions:** What is your reaction to these responses? What might it tell you about your normal Sunday worship? How might you enable your regular congregation and people more on the fringe of the church to encounter God more deeply and more often through your Sunday services?

**Question 3: Tell about the ways people fight in this congregation. Tell about a situation where you and other people were involved in a problem at church and how it was handled:**

24 interviews, 91 remarks

**How people fight (43 remarks)**

Expressing strong views – 2

Not getting involved – 5

Significant/vigorous debate – 4

Verbal disagreement – 3

Divided congregation – 4

Raising problems/issues – 2

Leaders and strong personalities dominate - 2

**Mentioned once each:** embedding themselves in routine (denying); infighting; unpleasant; vitriolic; acrimonious; emotional; “upset and appalled”; thoughtful; caring; diplomatic; shock; bitterness; few disagreements; losing friends; open meetings; peacemakers/mediators; grumbling; giving up; emotional (no God-centred) upset; views about ‘proper’ church; no factions.

**Things people fight over (21 remarks)**

Reordering – 16

**Mentioned once each:** staff issues; for charity; for each other; lack of inclusion; change.

**How was it handled (27 remarks)**

All views listened to – 4

Compromise – 4

Compromise but tensions remain – 2

Satisfactory compromise/‘right decision’ - 4

**Mentioned once each:** plans changed to keep the peace; preaching about reconciliation; meetings; talking it through; people pulling together; thoughtful; caring; diplomatic; redundancy; people threatened to leave; people stayed; not enough discussion/consultation; people gave up.

**Observations and recommended questions to consider:**

- **Observations:** The high number of responses identifying the reordering as a catalyst for conflict suggests that the reordering project evoked much strong feeling and was divisive within the congregation. A few people (4 responses) used quite extreme language to describe how people fight and their feelings about this particular conflict.  
**Questions:** What does this level of response tell you about the effect on the church at the time of the conflict and its ongoing effect? What is the pattern (perhaps unspoken) for handling conflict within the church? Without revisiting the issues around the reordering, can you find ways to learn from your experience especially when there is significant disagreement (we wonder how it featured and was dealt with at your timeline event too)? What might you learn from this conflict that will help you deal with future conflicts? Is conflict always/inevitably a bad thing?
- **Observations:** One respondent identified himself as a peace-maker, and one mentioned preaching about reconciliation. Alongside this, the number of responses identifying the resolution of the conflict by compromise (10 remarks), discussion (1 remark) and open listening (4 remarks) indicate that many people were involved in the practical work of reconciliation throughout the process. You have significant strengths in resolving conflicts.  
**Questions:** Who are the peace-makers in or on the fringes of Holy Trinity? Two remarks indicate dominant voices during the conflict. What role does the leadership take in resolution of conflict and reconciliation? What reconciliation remains to be done within and beyond the church? How will you approach that reconciliation work? PMC has some practices based on spiritual discernment which can help you here.

**Question 4: Tell a memory that gives you anxiety about the future of this congregation. Tell a memory that gives you hope:**

24 interviews, 68 remarks

**A memory that gives you anxiety about the future here (35 remarks)**

Reordering - 4

Declining congregation – 2

Aging congregation – 2

Not attracting/retaining families – 3

Lack of growth – 2

Lack of youth/young adults – 2

Difficult finding people to do jobs – 2

Insufficient pastoral support - 3

Previous incumbent – 2

None/very little - 3

**Mentioned once each:** declining congregations nationally; fearful of ‘tainted’ memories; change; closure; unloving talk; children’s work leaders; cliquy groups; causing offence; people airing concerns; unwillingness [of older people] to change

**A memory that gives you hope (28 remarks)**

Reordering – 2

Raising money for reordering – 2

Church unity when no access to the building - 2

Good leadership – 2

Children’s work – 2

Moving on after disputes – 2

Prayer and support through difficulties – 3

New people and families joining the church - 3

**Mentioned once each:** full church at Christmas/Easter; christening exceeding expectations; finding ways forward; ability to cope with most things; interactive sermons; discussing readings; home-bred choir; community events (eg for Royal Wedding); increased ‘faith activity’; unfounded anxiety over reordering.

**Hopes for the future (5 remarks)**

**Mentioned once each:** more community engagement; increased ‘faith activity’; growing faith; more lay leadership; more ‘Good Samaritanism’.

**Observations and recommended questions to consider:**

- **Observations:** Almost half the responses identify anxieties about decline, closure, lack of growth, aging congregation and inability to attract younger people into the church (15 responses). A further 6 responses identified the reordering as a source of past anxiety. There is an interesting difference between these responses and those to Q3, which identified widespread unhappiness and anxiety around the reordering.

**Questions:** How surprising is the balance between anxiety around future decline and conflict and anxiety in the past about the reordering? In the light of a response to Q1 which mentions “huge and hidden faith”, what do you think might be the huge and hidden anxieties of people connected to Holy Trinity? How might you create the safe space in which people feel able to express their anxieties and reframe them within the bigger story of the Christian faith? How might you help people to focus more on their hopes than their anxieties?

- **Observations:** The number of remarks articulating anxiety (35) are almost equal in number to remarks about hope now and in the future (33 remarks). While some respondents are anxious that there are few families and young people in Holy Trinity, an equal number are report that there are new people and families joining the church and good children's work. There is an interesting balance of perception here.

**Questions:** How far are you looking for the seeds of the future in the present life of the church? And, to repeat the question in the point above, how might you help people connected with the church to focus more on their hopes for growing numbers of young families than on their anxieties that there are too few families?

- **Observations:** Several respondents (11 remarks) allude in some way to the reordering project as a source of hope for the church. Given the amount of conflict that surrounded the project, this is a wonderful turn-around. Well done!

**Questions:** What are you learning from the way people's views about the project have changed? How might this help you to address anxieties about decline? What practical ways might there be for you to use the new building as a way of building stronger links with the community? How might you acknowledge people's anxieties while developing that hopeful sense that God has a preferred and promised future for you?

**Question 5: If you were to leave this congregation for five years, without any contact, what would you expect to see when you returned? What would you hope to see?**

24 interviews, 79 remarks

**What do you expect to see here after 5 years? (35 remarks)**

Little/no change – 10

Negative change – 18

Declining numbers – 10

Aging congregation – 4

No newcomers - 2

**Mentioned once each:** passive feel; financial struggles.

Positive change - 5

Some new people - 2

**Mentioned once each:** vibrant church; warm welcome; better use of buildings.

**Mentioned once each:** change of clergy; no change of clergy.

**What do you hope to see here after 5 years? (44 remarks)**

Little/no change - 7

Same atmosphere/feel – 3

Same services – 4

Positive change - 37

More family involvement – 11

Vibrant church – 4

More young people – 2

More community engagement – 3

More age mix – 2

Different styles of worship - 3

Growing numbers - 2

**Mentioned once each:** better maintained graveyard; spiritual growth; outgoing; welcoming church; more use of social media; more commitment; small groups; loving inclusion; “everyone still surviving”; promotion of rector.

**Observations and recommended questions to consider:**

- **Observations:** There is a marked difference between what respondents expect to see here after 5 years and what they hope to see. The expectations are for little or no change (10 remarks) or negative change (18 remarks), chief among them declining numbers (10 remarks). Reading this alongside the anxieties about decline identified in Q4, we could conclude that there is an underlying sense of anxiety about the way things are headed in the next 5 years.

**Questions:** How far do you agree with this potential conclusion? How do you feel about it? What signs of underlying anxiety do you notice in the church and its wider fringe? How might you help people within the church and the wider fringe to be open about their anxiety and feel empowered to initiate and support change? What might be the impact of church members feeling more involved in growing church numbers?

- **Observations:** The changes people hope to see are overwhelmingly positive (37 remarks). People are very positive about the future of Holy Trinity. This is not always the case in churches across the UK. What good news that people in Holy Trinity are so positive about change and the future! This says to us that the ‘seeds of the future’ are already present amongst you – e.g. you have people hoping for more family and community involvement.

**Questions:** How might you help people to articulate to each other their hopes and dreams for the church? How might you be able to incorporate this in worship? Could this become a regular habit? If you begin articulating your hopes publicly and regularly within the church, what difference would you expect to see in the worship and in people’s behaviour?

**Question 6: Describe this congregation to someone new and tell how they would be nurtured here.**

24 interviews, 112 remarks

**Describe this congregation (72 remarks):**

Welcoming – 12

Generally – 7

To newcomers - 5

Friendly/fairly friendly – 10

Middle aged/older/aging – 15

Traditional – 4

Sociable – 2

Inclusive - 4

Accepting of children – 4

Lots of personalities – 2

Few families - 2

**Mentioned once each:** strong congregation; good attendance; ungracious; difficult to connect; mostly female; few young people; cliquy; well established; happy; very slow; professional; middle class; white; no pressure; faction-free; interesting; supportive.

**How would someone new be nurtured here? (40 remarks)**

No response/unable to respond - 2

Positive remarks - 30

Encouraged get involved/volunteer – 7

Inclusion/'drawn in' - 5

Talking to newcomers – 3

Pastoral support by church family – 3

Social activities – 2

Friendship - 2

By clergy – 2

Conflated with welcome - 2

**Mentioned once each:** accessible services; look out for newcomers; music; not pressured.

Negative remarks - 8

People sometimes overlooked – 2

**Mentioned once each:** not accepting; difficult to find a connection; no small groups; not happy talking about faith; welcome can be difficult; in services only.

**Observations and recommended questions to consider:**

- **Observations:** The respondents were almost all very positive in their descriptions of Holy Trinity. People generally seem to enjoy being connected with the church and are happy to talk about their experience of church with newcomers. This is very encouraging. New people in church always bring a challenge and change so it is a little unclear from these responses how intentional you are about accepting the newcomer on their terms, not yours.

**Questions:** What do you notice from the descriptions of Holy Trinity that surprises you? What do you notice that shocks you? How can you build on the largely positive impression your respondents have of Holy Trinity? How might you use this positivity in your connection with the wider community? What positive stories could you tell about Holy Trinity in your wider community?

- **Observations:** Your sense of challenge (identified on worksheet 2 – *Demographic and deprivation*) around “the age demographics of the parish community compared to the congregation” is reflected in the remarks describing your congregation. The remarks here indicate that people perceive Holy Trinity church as middle aged/older/aging (15 remarks). Alongside this, we notice that 3 respondents are under 40, with one being in his teens. While not a large percentage (12.5%) are under 40, it’s important to recognise that many UK churches have a much smaller percentage and would not consider inviting teenagers to participate in an interview like this. You seem to value the views of your younger people.

**Questions:** How might you help people to notice and value the younger people connected with Holy Trinity? How might this seeing the ‘seeds of the future’ in the present change perceptions of your church? How might helping younger people to take a more significant role in the life of Holy Trinity contribute towards growing the church younger?

- **Observations:** There were noticeably fewer responses to the part of the question about nurture (40 remarks) than the part about description (72 remarks). We notice that the language respondents have used about nurture refers almost entirely to informal nurture through being ‘drawn in’, pastoral support, being talked to and through social activities. Seven of the remarks particularly mentioned newcomers being encouraged to participate by taking on jobs. We also noticed that 7 remarks acknowledged that welcome and nurture are sometimes absent or inadequate.

**Questions:** What surprised you about these responses? What shocks you? What are the structures (perhaps unspoken or informal) within the church for nurturing people’s faith, especially those coming entirely new to faith? How might you encourage more people within the congregation to be “happy talking about faith”? Who are the primary nurture-givers and nurture-enablers in Holy Trinity? What do you notice about the way they talk about their faith to others? What can the church learn from them?

## Question 7 Tell about how you and others feel about the changes in this congregation since 2012.

24 interviews, 51 remarks

### Church change since 2012 (29 remarks)

Changes to the church building – 8

Changes to the congregation – 5

Positive – 4

**Mentioned once each:** additional clergy; more encouragement of new families; children are included more; new initiatives (eg prayer shawls).

Negative – 10

Declining congregation – 2

Fewer young families - 6

**Mentioned once each:** changes to the choir; new people are older.

**Mentioned once each:** fewer complete families; little change.

### Emotions specifically identified (15 remarks)

Loss -3

**Mentioned once each (12):** wary; loved (the building space); pleasantly surprised; pity; upheaval; upset; encourage; sadness; tension; pressure; divisive; mixed feelings.

### Emotions implied (7 remarks)

Anxiety (5)

**Mentioned once each:** nostalgia; loss.

### Observations and recommended questions to consider:

- **Observations:** Most (23) respondents identified some change within the church since 2012, even when they felt the church had remained “broadly consistent”. For some remarks where no feelings were specifically identified, we have inferred that respondents regarded the changes as positive or negative. We notice that there were significantly more negative changes (10 remarks) than positive changes (4 remarks). It’s worth noting too that the comments about changes to the church building and congregation changes were largely evenly balanced between positive and negative. The changes which prompted most comment were the reordering of the church building and the perceived decline, especially in young families.

**Questions:** What does this balance of positive and negative attitudes towards change tell you about the church and its wider fringe? How might you help people connected with the church to tell positive stories about change? It is particularly notable that one respondent remarked (in response to Q8) that “change can be good”. Who are the people who can help the church tell a more positive story about itself now, as well as in the future? How far are you engaging with the more unexpected sources of hope and encouragement connected with the church?

- **Observations:** Just over a third of respondents (9, 15 comments) articulated feelings/emotions related to change. We have inferred emotions of anxiety, nostalgia and loss from a further 7 remarks (eg “Until [we replace the young families who have left] we are going to be a dying congregation”).

**Questions:** What difference do you think it might make if people had a safe space where they felt able to express their emotions about past and future change more openly with each other? How can you create this space/time? What biblical parallels/texts might you be able to draw on to encourage this sharing of emotions?

## Question 8: Tell about how you and others feel about the changes in this community since 2012.

24 interviews, 57 remarks

### Community change since 2012 (43 remarks)

Little/no change – 13

More working parents - 2

No personal impact - 1

Don't know - 1

Positive change - 12

More young families – 3

More community activity/groups - 3

**Mentioned once:** new Sainsburys; active charity shop; more funding for community events; more social media use; growing youth group; reordering of church building

Negative change - 11

Perception of increased crime – 4

**Mentioned once each:** pubs and shops closed; community groups closed; less village atmosphere; lots of weekend activities; increased pressure on families; fewer young people in church; changes to the pub.

**Mentioned once each:** more working age men around in the working week; infant and junior schools working under 1 head; aging population.

### Feelings specifically identified (10 remarks)

Sadness - 3

**Mentioned once each:** worry; safe; community feel; unsafe; enjoyment; nurtured; pressured

### Feelings implied (4 remarks)

**Mentioned once each:** anxiety; fear; familiarity; nostalgia.

### Observations and recommended questions to consider:

- **Observations:** There were (marginally) fewer remarks about changes within the community than the number of remarks about church change. However, 15 of the remarks to this question identified little/no change (13), not being personally impacted by change (1) or not feeling able to comment on the level of change. Of the changes identified, the balance between positive and negative perceptions of the changes is fairly evenly balanced.

**Questions:** What does this tell you about people's attitude to change in general and to change within the church? What can you learn from this? Comparing the responses to Q7 and Q8, it appears that people perceive there has been more change within the church since 2012 than there has been within the community. How accurate do you think this perception is? How significant do you think the changes to the community have been since 2012? Can you identify any trends which might help you discern what God is calling you to be and do in Prestwood?

- **Observations:** We notice that while some of the community's amenities (pub, shops) have closed you have refurbished the church building.

What might be the community's perception of this? What is the church's perception? How can community and church share these perceptions with each other? What might be the impact of such sharing?

- **Observations:** Where respondents identified emotions/feelings about change (10), or where they can be implied from the remarks (4), the emotions have been evenly balanced between positive and negative feelings.

**Questions:** What opportunities do you notice from these emotions and the identified community changes that the church might be able to build upon? How might you respond to the sense of fear and anxiety about safety among some of the older members of the community about increased levels of crime? How might you respond to the closure of some community groups "through lack of organisers"? How might you respond to the perception that there are more young families in the community and more changes to the patterns of work?

## **A Final Overall Observation**

We wonder if you might like to 'play' with a picture of Holy Trinity as a 'Sleeping Giant' who is waking up! Sleeping Giant because of the "huge and hidden faith" you have contained with the church and waking up as you have put on a new set of clothes (albeit somewhat controversial in the refurbishment) and maybe ready to start "moving and shaking" within the Prestwood. Please feel free to accept or reject or modify this picture as you see fit.