Bryan Harris’s PARISH PROFILES

St Faith’s, North Dulwich

St Faith’s, North Dulwich, could be excused if it offered a bit of an identity crisis. Ask the congregation where they live, half will say Dulwich, the rest Herne Hill, Denmark Hill or even Camberwell. The local authority doesn’t help – St Faith’s is in two Council wards – and to cap it all, cross its western boundary and you’re in a new deanery, archdeaconry and Episcopal Area.

The Vicar, Rev Hugh Dawes, says he and his wife often feel they are the only residents of ‘North Dulwich’, but then they live next door to the church. St Faith’s celebrates 50 years in the current building this year and its centenary as a centre for worship in 2009. The church itself forms one wing of a quadrangle - the other wing is an Edwardian church hall where services were held until the present church was built in 1957. It is now a community centre. The two wings are linked by a series of meeting rooms and vestries.

Built of concrete with brick cladding, St Faith’s is not a specially attractive building outside – you need to come inside to appreciate its simple beauty. The nave walls are white, which contrast with the brightly coloured ceilings, seating, carpets and display panels and, with the light furniture, give an air of space and calm.

Hugh Dawes (right) has been the Vicar for 7 years – and numbers among his predecessors the current Bishop of Horsham, Lindsay Urwin. After serving his curacy in Southwark Hugh spent 23 years in Cambridge as a college chaplain and then a parish priest. In Cambridge he wrote a book ‘Preaching the Faith’ which was seen as controversial by some areas of the church. He is also Chair of the Progressive Christian Network so when he was offered St Faith’s, a traditional Anglo-Catholic parish, he admits to being a little surprised – but he accepted, and has ‘absolutely no regrets’. However it was, he admits a steep learning curve coming to an urban multi-cultural community after East Anglia – “and if it was hard for me, it must have been hard for the parish, but they never showed it. They were welcoming, helpful – and understanding’.

Among those who helped him make the transition was Jill Sandham, then Diocesan Community Development Worker, now Director of Operations at Welcare and since 2004, Hugh’s wife.

“The past seven years have been a very exciting and enjoyable time. As a parish we have achieved and are achieving many things together. We have been working hard on what ‘inclusivity’ really means if we treat it seriously. We believe it means allowing everyone, including those who don’t like the idea of inclusivity and whatever their age or cultural background, to find their own place and ministry within the body of Christ.”

For example, St Faith’s has always been a multi-ethnic community, more mixed than the local community – but that wasn’t obvious in church structures. “Now all ages and cultures are represented at all levels” he said. “in all the different parish teams (committees), in our ministry with young people, among our musicians, servers, lay involvement in worship. We don’t pressure people – but if individuals aren’t involved it’s because they prefer not to be, not because of any barriers”.

St Faith’s Dulwich is a complex community, as a social case study it was carried out in St Faith’s in 2002/3 shows. Part of the parish is very ‘Dulwich old’ and on the exclusive ‘Village’ with houses once in multiple occupation now going for up to £1 million for conversion back into one-family homes. In contrast there’s an extensive area of social housing. 1920s houses and blocks of flats, many, now in private hands. There, ethnicity is very mixed, with a number of Flame families and among the tenants of what’s left of Southwark Council’s housing stock.

“The social audit pulled people together,” said Hugh, “and began some very good networking and initiatives, including the Three Hills Community Forum which brought the local councilors, GP’s, police, churches and residents and began an annual community festival”.

The Forum also mobilised the local residents to defeat the proposed withdrawal of a local bus route with a campaign of letters, doorsteping and lobbying. The political involvement led to Hugh standing for Southwark Council in 2003. “It raised the profile of the forum and the church” he said. He lost the election by votes and although bitterly disappointed at the time, now seems slightly relieved!

St Faith’s has retained its catholic tradition. They try to ‘do liturgy well’ but with a ‘generosity of interpretation’.

“We are a Eucharistic community and how we make the Eucharist is what defines us,” said Hugh. “Our Eucharist is an all-inclusive place where the meal is shared together around the table.” So frequently the whole congregation literally gathers around the altar during the Eucharist prayer.

“Our aim is to be a meeting of Christ’s family at which Christ is in us and Christ in Jesus speaks to us,” said Hugh. Hugh has no curate – but he does have a ‘team’ – a Reader and a SQA, both ‘mature’ but still active, a Canadian priest in his 70s and a retired IRC minister, both of whom preach occasionally – plus a raft of lay help. In addition geographically it’s a small parish, “so I have time to loiter and just meet people”, said Hugh, “and to follow up the opportunities presented by occasional offices”.

There are very few weddings at St Faith’s – although it has picked up recently with an influx of people with ‘immigration issues’ to the local estates. That has led to Hugh being alongside people at immigration hearings - even in an advocacy role.

There are two or three funerals a month, another opportunity for ministry – and every year around All Souls there is a service of remembrance to which increasing numbers of recently, and not so recently, bereaved come.

Young people play an important part at St Faith’s.

“We have an open policy on baptism” said Hugh “and having a child baptised has brought several families back to church”. Children are admitted to communion from seven. “Mind you baptism equals church membership, so I don’t see why we impose arbitrary age barriers” said Hugh.

There are two nurture groups – Sunday school for 5-11s and Explorers for 12 and over (a surprising number of teenagers stay involved). On Sundays they take part in the 10am service until the Collect, then go off for their own Ministry of the Word returning at the Peace.

There is usually only one Sunday service although they have experimented with 1am at Christmas and Easter and occasional Sunday evenings, usually when it’s St Faith’s turn to stage the Churches Together in Dulwich ‘rotating’ service. Quite often quite a lot happens at weekends (many people work late all week!). The church has an ‘open door’ on Saturdays for coffee and chat; most meetings (PCCs etc) happen on Saturday mornings; last year the Lent course was run as part of Sunday worship with talks and group discussions (it didn’t suit everyone, but involved more than I would have gone to houses groups).

Hospitability is a ministry and getting to know each other have a high priority. So planning meetings happen at the vicarage after church on Sunday, often over lunch, and when I visited there was ‘drinks and nibbles’ for no particular reason! There have been Parish Weekends in 2005 and 2006 with workshops on everything from flower arranging to hymn writing (and making the current altar frontal); shared meals from Saturday breakfast to Saturday lunch and Sunday evening entertainment, where the most ‘unexpected talents! We do it ‘at home’ to keep the costs down - an important issue with some of the congregation”, said Hugh.

There’s also an annual Parish Outing - last year it took the form of a day trip to France. Currently a small group is working on the 50th anniversary celebrations, planned for October with a parish weekend involving Bishop Christopher. They are trying to make contact with people married or baptised at St Faith’s during each decade since 1957 (so that’s you, please contact Hugh Dawes).

There is also someone producing a video wearing together past and present to be presented and be shown at St Faith’s and Dulwich is a daughter church of St Paul’s, Herne Hill, in what later became the church hall and today is a community centre with a management committee of users, neighbourhood and church representatives. It is the base for everything from Bingo to Tai Chi and judo, and, when I visited one Tuesday afternoon, a hall-full of 60- plussers, members of ‘Lively Minds’, who meet for talks and tea. On another day the local Hindu society meets – and worships - there.

Until this month St Faith’s to me was just a regular Bridge delivery point – a dark building with a car park where you could park the van and sample the Thermos before moving on Streatham and all points south! Visit in daylight - and you appreciate the simple beauty of the building’s interior and get a sense of the caring and togetherness which characterises this worshipping community. Hugh Dawes says he doesn’t regret his decision to take the job – and I can understand why.

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