



Our Sunday morning service takes many forms and has evolved over many centuries but essentially we can draw a line of succession through Matins and Morning Service to Service of the Word. All still exist in some format or other but we at St Mary's tend to enjoy the less rigid nature of Service of the Word. Yet all services do follow a structure and in many ways this provides a comforting familiarity, a safe area where we can find peace and joy and have our spirits lifted without being too challenged – and all in under an hour.

At St Mary's we have dared to be different and draw leadership from within our group. This gives us the chance to have the service presented in various styles by a whole range of different personalities with a further breadth of astonishing knowledge and wisdom being imparted by our many speakers and for this we are truly fortunate and blessed.

And yet, despite this constant refreshing of our services and a format designed to last only between 45 minutes and an hour we sometimes come away feeling that the service has dragged a bit and we lost the thread some time back and never really recovered it. In fact, we have all felt like skipping the service and sometimes do.

So the prospect of another service on a Sunday evening, starting just as the nights became colder, darker, wetter and longer didn't really seem to be the brightest of ideas. The assurance that it would not last longer than 90 minutes didn't really add to the attraction of leaving a warm house on a cold evening. Yet a group of around 20 has met at each Prayer and Praise and as they haven't all been every time that means about 30 of us have come to Prayer & Praise; about half of our morning worshippers.

Prayer and Praise has a format rather than a structure. We learn new songs, led by John Lambert, and sing them through until we are reasonably proficient, building our repertoire each month until we will be able to introduce the new music into our morning services. This repetition and search for improvement also helps us to focus on praising and enjoying giving praise then slips seamlessly into looking at our Christian lives within St Mary's, Long Newton, Teesside and beyond.

Last Sunday Kath Snowdon, school governor at St Mary's and also heavily involved with developing children's worship in our church spoke about the work being done. Whether intentional or not, Kath spoke for about 15 minutes with only the briefest of notes and provided a tremendous insight into the work being done in the school & St Mary's. She highlighted the opportunities that young people have to be involved in St Mary's with regular GodZone, Messy Church, Little Ted and the children's group on Sunday mornings. We then broke into small groups to pray for our children's ministry. Some prayed aloud, some quietly and some discussed matters that had only just come into their understanding – it didn't matter which. If you feel called to be involved in children's ministry but are not currently doing so, then speak to Kath or any of the team.

We then moved on, after another musical interlude, to looking at the work being done through PACTne at Eagle House in Darlington with Trevor Birtle. Trevor was able to enlighten us about the recent developments that are providing a much surer footing for this fledgling charity; its first young family is in residence and the recent positive Council audit which will open the way for many more referrals. This in turn will help PACTne to be self-funding but there is always the need for more investment to complete the rest of the units ready for occupation. Once again, we split into groups to pray through this work being done to give young families a chance of a decent start in life.

John became aware that time was running away so we moved on to hearing about the plans for the development of Cornerstone from Pam Birtle, the only Christian Fostering Agency still in existence. Cornerstone would like to continue as an adoption agency but they are very much in the sights of Ofsted who are trying to close them down for having the temerity to not be a secular organisation and operating on a Christian foundation. We were able to pray for the survival of Cornerstone and success in its High Court battle with Ofsted. Throughout this difficult time, Cornerstone are still seeking to place some of the most troubled and disadvantaged children in our society and are extending their team to help grow clusters of families in the North East and also expand into Yorkshire, Humberside and Bolton areas next Spring as a precursor to expanding the service across the UK. Ofsted has the capability to close down this precious foundation and they need our prayers that their legal challenge will be successful and that they can become a Voluntary Adoption Agency in 2018.

We had welcomed John and Janet Taylor and they were due to talk and pray about the work being carried out at Stockton Parish Church but we had run out of time again. We look forward to hearing from them at Prayer & Praise in January.

From the perception that this could be a long hour, Prayer & Praise flew by and had to be brought to a premature close. There is a vitality, energy and humour which became infectious and left us wanting more, but we will have to wait until after Christmas.

If you have the opportunity, do come along and join in; it may just add to your life in worship.

The next Prayer and Praise is on January 28<sup>th</sup> 2018, the fourth Sunday in the month.