

## Growing in Christ-like love

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
Revd Rebecca Newland  
Epiphany 5, 5th February 2012  
*Matthew 22:37-39*

Today I do not have a sermon to deliver—at least not in the way that I normally do. I don't, because someone asked me during the week what was happening with our framework, our plan, which we worked on throughout 2010 and began to implement through 2011. Given the question was asked, I thought it was high time that I brought everyone up to date. Partly why it is taken me this long to do so is actually a great and beautiful paradox that I hope you will see as I share further.

We developed the plan to help our Parish grow and thrive. Not just numerically but spiritually, and as a community growing in faith. The framework begins with a statement about who we are and what we are about at St Philip's: "We glorify God and make disciples by creating a community where we live the love of Christ."

Our mission is to, "Connect people who are disconnected into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ."

Next, the framework sets out our values, values in which Christ is central. As we follow Christ we value ...

- Inclusion: we respect the individual and embrace and honour diversity.
- Relevance: we promote Christ as central for our community, our world and ourselves.
- Caring: we share Christ's love through welcome, hospitality, service and stewardship.
- Relationships: we build nurturing connections with God, each other and the wider community.
- Worship: We provide a space for people to celebrate and grow in the healing love and grace of Christ.

We strive for ...

- A relationship with the triune God that is personal and daily.
- A relationship with others that is respectful and caring.
- A relationship with the world that engages neighbours and nations.
- A commitment to worship, fellowship and service.

These are the steps we seek to follow:



The area on which the planning group felt that we particularly needed to focus is welcoming and connecting with each other—if you like, to put into practice God’s hospitality.

I have been told to be careful what you pray for and I now agree. Only a month or so after the planning group and myself presented the framework to last year's AGM, 80 to 90 Anglican Christian Dinka people turned up on our doorstep looking for a place to worship and to call home. And over the last 12 months we have seen new people join our 10 am service, which is just delightful and a great blessing. So effectively since this time last year, one way or another, we have doubled the size of our parish community. This has of course brought great gifts but also challenges, particularly as we had many things to negotiate with this new relationship with our Dinka brothers and sisters. Issues to do with governance, administration, leadership, pastoral care and much more.

So because we have grown in more than one way, Parish Council has not had much time and space to concentrate on growing! God does indeed have a sense of humour.

It is almost as if God has said: “Right. You say you want to grow, you want to be inclusive, you want to be welcoming and offer hospitality, you want to help people connect to the Christ, you want to reach out to the world and be relevant — well, HERE YOU ARE. Here are some radically different people to yourself and here are some people just like you.” How amazing is that!

And we must say thank you to God. Thank you that you have given us this opportunity to love and serve. Thank you that you have blessed us with such wonderful, dynamic, talented people—and I am talking about both congregations.

However, even though we have been sidetracked in keeping the framework in front of you all, it has become part of our brochures, our documents and our website. It has informed all our decisions and been part of all our discussions consultations with various leaders and institutions. Here are just some examples to give you an idea:

When Paul Wallis prepared a paper for us on university chaplaincy, to help us in deciding what our ministry should be at the ANU, the framework was foundational in his report. It has also been part of my ongoing talks with Burgmann College.

When I began the Spiritual Formation group and the bible study last year I was responded to those parts of our strategy where it talked about connecting and teaching.

When we have had discussions with the Dinka about how we work together it has been vital. I have been able to present the framework and say that we value inclusion, being relevant, caring, relationships and worship. Can you work with us in that way?

When I created and edited the seasonal booklets we were trying to make our worship more accessible and easier for people to connect with so that our relationship, our very diverse relationships with God, our connection with God is deepened and strengthened.

When we have been reflecting on and thinking about our facilities and buildings on site what has informed our thinking is the need to have welcoming, accessible spaces where our ministry of care and service can continue and people feel at home.

In discussions with other groups like Anglicare about possible future relationships the framework has been handed out and around so that possible partners are clear what we are on about and what we value.

As the Rector of the parish and the one who is engaged in all these things and many more, to have that framework has been invaluable and important to me. It has meant I have been able

to be clear with others about who and what St Philip's is and is trying to be. It has simplified decision-making and kept me focused through the ups and downs, questions and doubts.

With all these things and indeed everything that so many of you do as service to our community, I hope you can see there is an underlying concern for hospitality, connecting, welcome and care.

At the beginning of every service we hear the words of the great commandment,

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength. Jesus said this is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Matt. 22:37-39)

I was reading recently about all the ways we can determine if we are loving God. Things like the degree to which we love others. You have probably heard the phrase, "you love God just as much as, and no more than you love the person you love the least." Something to ponder over prayer I suspect. I have read about love being about compassion and forgiveness or wanting to linger in the company of the beloved. These are all true.

Yet love is more than what we do. It is also about space and openness. Love is about being open to the Other. In the case of God, the 'other' with a capital O. The Wholly Other who is God is a God of radical hospitality who, out of sheer gift, creates space for us to be and for blessings to flow. When we come to church, our worship is about that space where we open ourselves to God, the Wholly Other, to be blessed and to bless others in return.

It is this type of openness, this creation of blessed and blessing space, that our desire to welcome and connect is grounded within.

(That was a bit of a sermon wasn't it?!)

So what is it that I would like you to do as we move into this new year, with January gone already!

- I ask you to pray that we will continue to grow and thrive.
- I ask you to support and pray for our leaders, particularly those on Parish Council.
- I ask you to keep welcoming others, no matter who they are, where they are from, to create space for others to be.
- I ask you to keep doing that thing that you believe is important but that no one else seems to notice, particularly me who is not great on detail.
- I ask you to reach out and connect with each other, to get to know new people, old people. Watch out for each other, when you notice someone has not been around give them a call; invite someone for a meal or a coffee.
- I ask each of you to keep doing the wonderful job you are already doing with serving on committees, music, prayers, volunteering on Pandora's, gathering for discussions, creating wonderful celebrations and all the rest.

We want to be a place where people feel they belong, where exactly who each and every one of us and every newcomer is a blessing, where all of us are free to grow into an ever more deepening relationship with God, each other and the world.

I'd like to leave you with some words by Frank Laubach, missionary and mystic, who developed literacy programs for the poorest people in the Philippines. He wrote:

My child this makes me happy. Now let love flow out to my world of needy people around you. Despise not one of the least. Do not see colour or clothes, just souls and my children. Do not hear titles or languages; just hear me speak through them. I call from behind every eye, I float upon every wave of speech and song and sigh. See me in people, for I seek to make them grow in Christ-like love.

Amen