

Bryan Harris's

PARISH PROFILE

Coulsdon
St
Andrew

On the Sunday I visited, there was a baptism taking place during the Parish Communion. The preacher at the service was Hon. Curate, Teresa Munro, and 'mum' had been one of her pupils at school!

That's gives you an idea of the kind of parish it is. There are around 10,000 people in the parish but somehow everybody seems to know everybody, even those who only come to church occasionally – and strange as it may seem, they all appear to get on well.

Let's start by putting Coulsdon into perspective – it's nice, solid, middle class suburbia. Rows of tree-lined semis and detached houses with well tended gardens, 2 cars and 2.4 children in each!

Although the latter is questionable, as Coulsdon is a place where people tend to stay, so quite a large slice of the population is more likely to be walking a grandchild. But it's just as likely that child is going to the same school they did!

It's a largely 'white' population, but that is changing and the change is reflected in both the congregation and leadership of St Andrew's Church, where minority ethnic members play an active role at many levels.

St Andrew's Church suits its surroundings.

It's large and on an elevated site above the town-centre. It stands out – even at night an illuminated cross at the top of its tower announces its presence to passing train



travellers, even if trees partially hide the building itself from view.

It's an imposing building – built mainly just before World War I but now with a 1964 narthex at the west end, divided from the nave by a sliding fully-glazed screen with etched scenes illustrating the parable of the sheep and goats (Mt 25) done, I am told, with a dentist's drill.

The nave is separated by columns from aisles on both sides. There's a 'high' altar and reredos at the east end and an aisle altar at the chancel steps – and above the chancel the hanging crucifix which seems to adorn many of Southwark's early 20th century churches.

Across a small car park from the church is St Andrew's Church Hall used by clubs and organisations from guides, to an over 50's dance group and Weight Watchers. It's also a popular venue for family celebrations, one of the few halls in the area.

The church tradition is 'liberal Catholic' which, I was told, means a 'live and let live

attitude with a catholic style' – smells and bells very occasionally; Common Worship for most services but not too much formality. There's an 'agreed' church membership of just under 100 of whom 60 – 80 are the average Sunday congregation for the weekly 9.45 Parish Communion.

Other services held regularly include evening prayer every Sunday (and Tuesday) with monthly choral evensongs, morning prayer during the week with a BCP Holy Communion on Wednesdays and a fairly recent innovation 'Refresh!' on the first Sunday of every month – a 40 minute service geared to younger children. Sunday School meets in the church hall on most Sundays with three age-groups from the age of three upwards and there's a youth group meeting in the Church Hall twice a month on Sunday evenings.

Other church activities include a family fun day in the summer for all 'baptism' children and an 'open to all' children's day in Advent and on Good Friday. They are looking to hold a Harvest Fair this year – and the aim is to get local schools and the wider community involved. St Andrew's doesn't have its own church school but they are in regular contact with the community primary schools and secondary school. During the week a there's a small group reading its way systematically through the Bible (they are currently in Isaiah). It started as a Lent activity last year – and just carried on.

Currently the living is 'suspended' – as there are proposals to build a new Vicarage – so the parish is currently cared for by a Priest-in-Charge. Vickie Sims is a quiet-spoken American whose road to Coulsdon began at the Anglican Chaplaincy in Milan

where she played the organ and was churchwarden during her 20 years in Italy teaching English to Italian business people. She came to the UK to train at Ripon College Cuddesdon and had her first curacy in Grantham before being drawn to Coulsdon.

She has found it "a place I can pray in with thoughtful welcoming people...". Her husband stayed in Italy so she now regularly 'commutes' to and from – "Thank goodness for Gatwick and EasyJet," she said.

She is supported by an Honorary Curate, Teresa Munro, a full-time teacher, and two Readers Susan Goddard and Tony King – Sue also acts as sacristan and Tony is the parish's 'computer techie'.

"Almost everyone in the congregation seems to be involved doing something to make things run smoothly around here. They are all very supportive," said Vickie.

'Welcome' is a major focus at St Andrew's. Part of that effort is to assume that not everyone



Rev Vickie Sims

at Sunday worship knows what to do – hence instructions in the service sheets and simple explanations during the service. It certainly helped the large baptism group on the Sunday I was there – one of 6 or 7 baptisms that take place each year, always during the main service.

Community action in the parish largely revolves round the Contact Group – about 15-20 volunteers who provide lifts to doctor and hospital appointments, help with shopping and visit people regularly. The group holds a monthly Pop-In Tea in the Church Hall open to anyone living in Coulsdon and organises occasional outings. There is also an active Mothers' Union branch, meeting twice monthly, once for Communion and once 'socially' usually with a speaker. There is also a Guide group [the Scouts and Beavers had to merge with other Coulsdon groups because



Sunday school children share what they have been doing

of shortage of leaders] – and a lot of involvement by individual church members, especially retired people, in local organisations "...people with very busy and active lives" said Vickie.

Financially the parish pays its way – giving away 10% of its income to charity – helped greatly by the sale of a 'daughter church' in the 80s "which means that if we need to spend capital we can 'borrow' it from ourselves," said Vickie. The church itself is in good order thanks to a lot of work done a few years ago but there are plans to redecorate and install new seating (a bit more comfortable) and to do a small re-ordering to enable communion to take place around the nave altar, much easier for those with mobility issues.

Vickie has been at St Andrew's three and half years and has spent that time "getting to know the parish and the people. Now its time for us to 'move on' together. In 2014 the church will celebrate its centenary, and we need to discover where we want to be as a worshipping community

by that time," she said. "The Centenary is an opportunity to raise the church's profile and it's important to decide what we want that profile to be". An Away-day is planned to look at the whole question of "...where we go from here," she said. "And that means looking at where and who we are now!"

Who they are now seems obvious – an agreeable crowd, free from any obvious internal stresses and says Vickie "zero nastiness!"

"It's just a very good place to be part of" said Vickie. "An accumulation of many things – people are nice to each other, they are willing to look outwards and to try things – and live and let live seems to be the watchword".

"I really do feel so blessed to be here among such a really good group of people. They appreciate the need to grow but they are also sensitive to the need for continuity. Discovering the way forward is going to be interesting" she said. But whatever the future holds I gained the impression that there will be no grumbles, just a willing acceptance and 'lets get on with it'.

Teresa Munro baptises her ex-pupil's baby



Sharing the peace

