

Faith Comment published in the Petersfield Post

24 August 2016: Dom Clarke - Church leader - St Matthew's, Blackmoor and Whitehill

What are we meant to be doing?

I was really inspired the other day by the story of the Rev'd Sally Smith of St Mark's Church, Stoke-on-Trent. In recent years the people who used to make up the congregation of this tiny church have been replaced by an eclectic mix of Iranians, Syrians, Iraqis, Bangladeshis and Eritreans who are all either looking for salvation in another religion or simply seeking charity. As a direct result of Sally's vision to respond to the needs of government placed refugees she has presided over a total transformation of St Mark's from a middle-class church to something resembling a refugee processing centre. At the church refugees are fed, housed, given advice and receive simple love, care and attention. In fact across the country churches are seeing a growing number of Muslims are converting to Christianity as the Gospel of grace, hope and love shared by Jesus and which St Paul wrote about (1 Corinthians 13) powerfully supersedes despair and fear.

Sally has however revealed that her biggest challenge in all this has been the attitude of some of the people within the church because, of course, her work has changed the look and feel of St Mark's almost beyond recognition. She has said, "I have lost lots of congregation members because of what has happened at the church. They don't want the hassle and they don't want the church being messed up. They see the church as having a very definite role and opening the doors to refugees isn't one of them." She adds: "They expected a vicar's role to be looking after the people inside the church. Well, this is what I am meant to be doing and you're meant to be doing it with me. We should be doing this together."

I wonder what we as small, middle-class churches in our part of the world we should be doing together to help those around us? Our circumstances are not the same as Sally's but every church can fall into the dangerous territory of being more about maintenance and self-preservation rather than being truly missional. Every church should have a focus first on foremost on those who are not yet it's members, nor are ever probably likely to be! As the world becomes, it seems, a tougher, scarier and more isolated place the Church has a key role to play and perhaps ours has yet to be truly found.

