

NOTICES WORTH HEARING

BY GRAHAM ARCHER, CPAS DIRECTOR OF MINISTRY

In a large church I visited, the verbal notice was regarded as the holy grail of communication. The triple lock on UK pensions was nothing compared to the checks and balances in place to prevent banal, irrelevant or dull announcements being made. Every announcement was carefully crafted by a staff member and presented as a video from interesting locations using footage, graphics and text. Weeks later in a small village church I heard the verbal notices introduced by the vicar with the words: 'Does anyone have anything they would like to tell us about the coming week?'. No pre-crafted strategic filters here as we heard about the changed time of the dog training classes and the reasons why the gate still hadn't been fixed. All sorts of things that made for village life were mentioned and this moment was clearly a high point in terms of parish communication.

Despite all the changes in communication technology, it seems that the verbal notice is still the pinnacle of communication in most churches. This is despite the fact that many people present won't hear what is said or remember the detail attached to it, so how do we do them really well?

THE POINT OF A VERBAL NOTICE

A verbal notice is not just the passing on of information. Emails, websites and pew sheets can do that. The purpose of a good verbal notice is to (a) underline the importance of something, (b) inspire people and (c) clarify how to get involved. I will illustrate with some poor examples we have all heard (and I suspect I have given!) and suggest some better alternatives.

1. **Importance.** 'There is a choir visit next Thursday, sorry Thursday week (thank you Mary) and all the info is on the website,' does not suggest that we think it is very important at all. 'I hope you have in your diary the visit of the children's choir from our link parish on Thursday week, 7.30 in the hall. I have the last twenty tickets here for £10 each and I'll be standing at the door at the end of the service. Don't miss out!'
2. **Inspiration.** 'The archdeacon's admission service and charge is here on Thursday in case you would like to come,' contains information that few will understand so cannot inspire. 'This year, the annual service that welcomes and commissions wardens is for once happening in our own church. This is a great opportunity to welcome leaders from other churches in the diocese and more importantly express to Steve and Reiko how much we value the work they do for us as wardens. Let's make it a great St Mary's celebration.'
3. **Involvement.** 'The plans for the new kitchen are on the board at the back. Have a look on the way out.' This implies that the congregation are all spectators. 'Plans for the new kitchen are gradually coming together although we are still in the planning stage. The board and table at the back suggest three ways you can be involved. The plans have a wide border so that you can write up your first impressions or suggestions on post-its and stick them there. The pledge sheets remind you where we have got to financially with information about how to give or run a fun fundraising activity. On the back there are prayer requests for the team and project. Bob will be standing there to answer any questions.'

THE FILTERING OF VERBAL NOTICES

You will notice that the examples I gave above of good practice are longer than the poor ones. This is because if something is worth saying, it is worth saying well to inform, inspire and involve people. Therefore we cannot manage more than three or four of them in one go. So how do we filter the many requests we receive?

1. Is it relevant to most people present? If the youth are going on a visit you are better off telling them information by social media rather than a notice. If the housebound are having a tea, dropping them a card is more use than telling everyone in the church. We all have strong information filters and if the first message is irrelevant we will switch off.
2. Is it strategic? It is better to keep giving notices about the church mission audit, progress reports on a major project and the reason why the book of Amos is being studied in small groups, if the decision to do so has been the product of some serious strategic reflection. Better this than information that involves remembering times and dates that are already available elsewhere.
3. Does it build the kingdom of God? Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:3, 'For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.' Amid all the practical information in the letter, his communication reminded the readers what they were about. For example, I heard the following: 'The care home visitors are meeting this week to reflect on the materials they use to help people find assurance in Christ in the later stages of life. Do pray for them and consider whether you could join them as a helper or driver.'
4. Does it build people up? One of the best uses of verbal notices is to thank people for things they have done and draw people's attention to the positive effect of things church members have done together. Impact is a word to keep in mind. If you thank people for their work on the parish fayre, can you say how much was raised, what positive feedback was received from those who attended and what impact it has on the community?
5. Is there difficult pastoral information to be given, what is the best way to do that to protect anyone who might be negatively affected by it, and draw people into prayer? Many of us will give information about older members who have passed away or people who are in hospital. Occasionally there will be big or unusual things like a still birth, a suicide or a tragedy in the community, or indeed in the nation. As I think back I recall several still births, two

murders in the community, a member of the congregation committing suicide, another being sent to prison, Princess Diana's death, a child being hit by a car, the impact of Brexit and a whole raft of other unsettling things. Sometimes it is right to say something verbally about how we might respond as a community and what to do with the feelings associated. In this case I suggest it is the only verbal notice or at least the last of very few with the opportunity for prayer built in somewhere.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

There is nothing wrong with a quick sketch or role play to draw people's attention to something you really want them to remember. 'The youth group will now perform a sketch entitled "Can I share your socks?" to remind us all about the parish weekend away.'

It isn't against any law to ask a person who is really good at giving notices to do it. Gifts are for the common good.

Once you accept one last minute notice request – you are on the slippery slope ...



FOR REFLECTION

1. In the coming six weeks what do you think are the most important things you need to remind people about in verbal notices?
2. Is there one notice you regularly give that you could present in a more creative way?
3. Is there feedback you can give on recent events that illustrates the kind of impact you want the church to be making for the glory of God in the future?