

Address to Steering Group – Wednesday 12th November 2009, SAM

On November 26th I will have been in the EBP for exactly a year.

I feel that so much has happened in the EBP in the time I've been here, but in many ways I still feel like I've just arrived, and I'm still getting to grips with the fundamentals of the situation.

What I understood when I took on the role of Coordinator, was that it was new role, in an experimental set-up. I was excited by the possibilities this new church set-up might present, and I looked forward to the challenges of helping to facilitate its development.

This was how I understood the crux of my position in the EBP.: A new, developing role in a new, developing situation. Very different from taking over a role already occupied by someone else in a well established and stable organisation. Although there were many expectations from all quarters for this role, it was a blank slate in the sense that it these expectations had never been tested before.

A phrase from some of the original bumf for my job description stood out for me from the start: 'to be a tangible focus for the growth of the EBP'. I have tried to use this idea to guide my work.

When I first arrived here the then Chair of the Steering Group tried to allow me time to assess the situation in the EBP, and decide how I felt I ought to respond to it. From the original job description the task which I felt was the central axis of my work was 'to assist in the establishment of a robust communication structure across and beyond the Partnership churches to include the diocese'.

I saw this as key and fundamental to the role I could play in helping to facilitate the development of the EBP.

With this in mind I have tried to establish myself as central point for communications across the Partnership, whether it be taking enquiries for weddings, baptisms, funerals and banns, organising and publishing the service rota, developing the website, producing the monthly calendar and quarterly newsletter, or just being a first port of call for people in the diocese and the general public.

At times I have had to make some difficult decisions as to what work to prioritise, in order to keep my work in line with what I believe is the overarching vision for this role. There is so much going on in the EBP, that it is impossible for me to be closely involved in the organisation of every event. However, what I *am* doing is trying to develop communication systems and databases of information and contacts for people to draw on when planning events. I'm also trying to make an inventory of all Partnership resources, materials and technologies, and make them available to anyone in the Partnership for use in their planning and organisation.

Another aspect of my work has involved being the first point of contact for people in emotional distress of many kinds, whether it be in person or over the phone. In order to respond to this I have had to draw on listening training, which I've received in a different context. However, I think it would be beneficial for a good proportion of my training budget to go towards training in dealing with dangerous or difficult people and situations. Being on the front line of the Partnership, especially when physically in the office, I've often encountered challenging situations when I had to assess a person's needs quickly, before passing them on to the right person, whether it be a priest or someone else in the Partnership.

These experiences have highlighted the importance for me of knowing the community in which I'm working. Since moving to Fishponds from Bedminster in May, my experience of my role has been

transformed as I've gotten to know the dynamics of at least one part of the EBP. Before this time coming half way across the city everyday only to sit in the office on my own for two hours and then go home often felt like a futile exercise. Since moving here I have realised how important engagement with the community is for the coordinator role – for example, knowing what services are available in the local area to direct people to – whether they be provided by the church or other organisations. Moving to the EBP area has also allowed me to attend more services and Partnership events, include prayer and bible study groups and social events. I feel it is vital to keep this up if I'm to do my job well - it is simply essential to continue getting to know the people of the churches which I'm supposed to be serving if my work is to develop in line with people visions and needs.

One the things that excited me about this role at the interview and in the first few months was the prospect of being able to contribute to discussions and decisions regarding the development of the EBP, and to taking up a leadership role, not in a hierarchical sense, but in a spirit of equality, respect and synergy.

With all of this in mind, I have met on two occasions over the last month or so, with what has become a sort of management sub-committee of the Steering Group, made up of the original working party which drew up my job description and conducted interviews, as well as the present EBP chair.

In these meetings we discussed how I and the EBP have felt about my first year in post, and together devised objectives and targets for my work in the year to come, copies of which you have been given.

I would just like to highlight some particular points.

To 'audit the administrative requirements of each church' and 'by March 2009 agree a level of service available to each church'. Over the past year I have taken on varying amounts of administrative work for each church, and there has been not inconsiderable confusion over what I was expected to be doing for the churches, from their point of view and from mine. Therefore in the coming months I would ask to be invited to PCC meetings so I can discuss administrative requirements face to face with all church representatives, collate this information, and get back to each PCC and the Steering Group with an agreed service across all EBP churches.

With regard to Steering Group meetings, to 'ensure minutes are taken, typed and circulated within 7 days'. It was felt at the sub-committee meetings that in order for me to be able to contribute more equally to EBP discussions, the actual task of taking the minutes could be shared around the group. The task of minute taking is one of on-the-spot discernment, and inevitably the minutes become a version of proceedings filtered through the perspective and understanding of the scribe. Therefore we might get a more rounded and varied record of meetings, as well as freeing me up for other administrative duties.

Something which I feel is implicit in the list of targets and objectives is access to church buildings. As an employee of the diocesan board of finance I have been entrusted to take on a share of responsibility for the running of the seven Partnership churches. To this date I only have 3 sets of keys out of 7. My primary reason for wanting to access the buildings is to facilitate communication around the Partnership. I have done a lot on email and with the website, but I'm continually being made aware that the majority of church attenders don't have access to these technologies. For this reason I would like to ask PCCs to allow me to erect dedicated Partnership notice boards in a

corner of each of the church buildings, so that I can access these about once a month to put up the calendar and any posters and flyers for upcoming EBP events.

To 'investigate opportunities for alternative office provision'. This was one of the tasks on the original job description, which at the beginning of my time here I thought would be quite central to the first phase of my work, but which very quickly fell by the wayside. It might be that I just mention this tonight, and we leave a fuller discussion to another meeting.

It was felt at the sub-committee meeting, that with your permission, it might be time to revisit this. The office space at St Mary's was only meant to be a temporary arrangement, and I don't feel it is functioning as envisaged.

The ideal, I believe, would be to occupy a shop front very close to centre of the EBP, but with enough passing traffic to make the office seen and used by the community. My vision is for a space which could simultaneously function as an administrative hub to be used by the whole partnership, a drop-in centre for the whole community of East Bristol, perhaps offering free tea and coffee, as well as a resource centre for all the Partnership Churches. Volunteers could come and person the office with me, in order to receive people – perhaps those who have been through the Prepared to Care course. Clergy could have a regular 'office hour' or 'drop-in' if they so chose. The emphasis would be on visibility and accessibility, and to provide a threshold which is easier for people in the community to cross than that of a church building.

Of course one the key problems now, as it was a year ago, is how to finance such a venture. But with your permission I would like to investigate the possibilities, draw up some costings, and report back to you in the new year. Of course it wouldn't hurt also to pray for a miracle, and you never know, if this is the right direction to be heading in, the path might just come clear.

Thank you for listening. Any questions or comments?