

RSCM Guildford Area Survey, May 2009

Introduction

Over the last year, members of the Guildford Committee have undertaken a survey of the music resources of almost every Anglican church in the Diocese. The report was commissioned following the appointment of a new Chairman and Secretary; it was realised that although the Guildford Area had run a relatively well supported programme for a number of years, we had little knowledge of what would be welcomed in the future.

The survey 'target' for each church was either the incumbent or organist/music group leader. Where it proved difficult to get in contact, the Parish Office was sometimes able to help complete the questions or suggest an alternative, eg Churchwarden. The survey was designed to be answered during a short phone call, although it was also sent by email to a number of contacts.

The report was discussed at the RSCM Council in February 2009 and several other areas have expressed interest in conducting similar surveys during this year. The RSCM is expected to consider the wider implications of the Guildford survey and other available surveys towards the end of the year.

The Guildford Diocese

The Diocese has a population of c 960,000 and covers around 500 sq miles. It has both rural and urban areas including significant areas of deprivation, as well as some of the most expensive housing in the UK. There are 163 parishes, with a reported 218 churches (Diocesan Handbook 2006). However, the survey has only uncovered details of 212 churches, of which 188 (88.7%) have been contacted. The initial target of contacting every parish has been achieved; those churches remaining to be surveyed are for the most part small daughter churches and some do not have services every week. Their omission is unlikely to effect the outcome of the report and its conclusions.

The results

A summary table of the results is attached.

Services

The first question that was asked related to the 'main' service, and for most churches this is usually a communion, morning worship or family (all age) service on Sunday morning. Most have varied programmes through the month, and some have more than one morning service to cater for differing tastes in worship, or where particularly big congregations have developed and outgrown the accommodation available for one service. Almost 60% of churches have at least one evening service each month, although the format varies widely - from Choral Evensong and Vespers to Youth Praise and Café Church.

Music

The accompaniment used at almost half (48%) of those surveyed is organ and/or piano, indicating a 'traditional' approach to worship. Around 83 (44%) of churches have services that use either a combination of musical accompaniment, or have services which separate the different forms of accompaniment according to the congregation that attends (eg a 9am Parish Communion with organ and choir, followed by a Family Service at 11 am with a band or music group). 14 churches (7.5%) use only contemporary music at all of their services.

Choirs & Music Groups

Well over half of those surveyed – 118 churches (63%) have choirs that sing regularly – many each week, or at least once a month. There were rather fewer (53 churches, 28%) with Junior Choirs. Over half (52%) of the churches had some form of music group. It should be noted that the term has a wide meaning, including a ‘flute and guitar’, whilst others more readily referred to ‘the band’. Only 24 (12.7%) of the churches surveyed had services without either a choir or music group.

Numbers in Choirs, Music Groups and Junior Church; contacts with schools

The survey recorded 1459 adults and 422 juniors singing regularly in 118 choirs. Remarkably, this averages at 12 adults for each choir, and 8 juniors for each church where there is a junior choir. On average choirs in the Diocese have 16 adults/juniors. Of course this is not the reality everywhere! In most Deaneries, there are one or two large choirs, and several others with ‘five old ladies’. Well over 300 people sing in occasional choirs that are formed for major festivals or special occasions.

Those playing or singing in music groups of all kinds amounted to 851, an average of 8.8 per band/group for each church with this type of music. Again, care needs to be taken when using the figures – St Saviour’s Church in Guildford has a rota of 70 musicians and 9 bands, whilst nearby churches have just 2 or 3 instruments.

The number of young people attending Junior Church at 3676 is higher than all the musicians put together. Obviously this covers a wide age range, but is almost 9 times the numbers singing in Junior Choirs.

Well over half the churches surveyed (62%) are in contact with their local church or state school (although several responses did not record an answer to this question).

Affiliates

The number of Affiliates in the Guildford Diocese is somewhat uncertain. According to the RSCM database at the end of 2008, 102 parishes were affiliates (62.5% of the 163 parishes). Of greater interest is the number of churches covered, and this is where evidenced data is hard to come by. It is certain that some parishes ensure that each of the two copies mailed quarterly get to an appropriate recipient – perhaps the organist or choir trainer. However, where there is more than one church in a parish it is unclear if copies do indeed get to all those involved in music making. With the benefit of some local knowledge, we can be reasonably sure that the survey covered at least 106 churches that are either Affiliates, or in an affiliated parish with two churches but with a contact at each (eg Churt with Hindhead). If the figure of 106 churches is correct, then this is a penetration of 56% of the churches surveyed.

Of the 106 affiliated churches, 90 (85%) have choirs; 58 (55%) have music groups and 45 (42%) have both.

Sunday by Sunday (SbS)

One of the questions asked about the sources used for hymn selection – 75 churches claimed to use SbS, or 40% of the total surveyed. Most of those using the guide are Affiliates (although some proudly noted that they were Individual Members). It would appear that overall 70% of Affiliates are using SbS, but a note of caution should be taken – in the Guildford Deanery there are 8 Affiliates (of whom only 5 use SbS), whilst in total in Guildford 8 respondents claimed to use it.

Awareness of the RSCM Guildford Area

A large percentage of respondents (80%) said that they were 'aware' of the Guildford Area. This may indeed be the case, but it is also possible that this awareness was created merely by being contacted and doing the survey. It is likely that many of the incumbent/parish office respondents are aware of the RSCM, but whether they are fully aware of the activities offered by the Guildford Area is difficult to assess.

Typical wish list

One of the questions asked 'if you could wave a magic wand, what additional (music) resource would you most like?' As might be expected, the answers were wide-ranging and obviously depended on (a) the role of the respondent, and (b) the individual circumstances of the church in question. However, various themes emerged; the need for a list of deputy organists (preferably on the local website); more singers – adults, men & juniors; more musicians; organists prepared to take a permanent position; choir trainers; Directors of Music to coordinate all musical resources.

Courses requested

Many respondents were unable to offer suggestions for courses, particularly those contacted by phone. However, those who did often came up with imaginative ideas that have not previously been considered in Guildford. A common theme amongst incumbents with music groups was a course to assist with 'sympathetic accompaniment'; one name suggested for such a course highlighted the issue – 'Less is more!' Other requests included courses for juniors; courses for small choirs; 'sight-singing made easy'; 'improve your choir', and a training event for sound desk operators.

Hymnbook survey

Part of the survey requested information on which hymnbooks are used, largely to then introduce the question about hymn selection and SbS. Whilst of no great significance to the Guildford Area, it did provide interesting information, and in particular several negative comments from musicians and organists about the various versions of 'Hymns Old and New'.

Implications for the RSCM Guildford Area

Some of the possible implications for the Guildford Area are listed below; this is not an exhaustive list and it is hoped that further discussion by the committee will produce a coherent future strategy that will appeal to the existing affiliates and also attract new members.

1. Currently, there are no RSCM events for those involved with music groups, and yet over half of affiliates have them. Although 'Spring Harvest' was often quoted as a useful resource by those in music groups, several respondents felt that there should be more training available locally for both musicians and singers involved in contemporary music. The 'less is more' concept seems not to have been considered by those already providing training for musicians involved with contemporary church music. A common view emerged of enthusiastic singers and musicians who make a joyful noise, but who have not had that much training.

2. Events for choirs with limited resources were a frequent request. However, meeting this demand is not straightforward as the 'limited resources' vary considerable and include ageing singers who may not wish to travel for an evening event.

3. There is a need for more organists. Significant numbers of churches use rotas that rely on very few organists, and several commented that there were no young organists. Schemes to promote organ playing are already run by Oundle and the RCO, and the new 'Skills...' programme may provide a formal framework for learning. However there doesn't appear to be anything to encourage young pianists who already attend church to start playing the organ.

4. We should gather together details of organists available to deputise and put their contact details on the website – the Oxford Area already does this.

5. Although the number of junior choirs is disappointing, numbers of young people in Junior Church activities is encouraging (averaging almost 20 per church). This might present an area for growth. For example, several churches within the Diocese have recently used the musicals of composers such as Sheila Wilson to produce attractive and alternative nativities. It might be possible to hold events during the summer for Junior Church leaders and in the autumn run a workshop for the children prior to a nativity performance in their own church. The musicals typically include a CD with backing tracks, so even churches with limited resources could be helped.

6. Some larger churches are already 'lending' musicians to those with more limited resources, especially for contemporary music. Perhaps in the longer term, we could consider a mentor scheme linking experienced musicians with those who have just started, or need particular help.

7. With respect to the RSCM's 'products', the possibility of promoting Sunday by Sunday to non-Affiliates in the Diocese should be considered. A marketing campaign might involve sending a free-of-charge copy to all non-affiliates (approx 80 churches), with the expectation that some might then want to join.

8. Perhaps the most important outcome from a local viewpoint was the opportunity to make contact with churches and individuals who had never heard from any RSCM representative. Many respondents welcomed the opportunity to chat, and significant numbers asked for further contact. A common theme emerged during the survey of the isolation of church musicians, especially where there are limited resources. The idea of an informal network, possibly based around the Deaneries, may provide a means of continuing these contacts. The intention would be to have one musician per Deanery to provide a 'first point of contact' for those needing help or inspiration. They would be asked to circulate information or reminders about RSCM events to the musicians in the Deanery, and might want to hold an occasional social event (coffee morning or drinks in the pub) to encourage discussion and co-operation. The point about the Deanery is that it is a manageable unit – in the Guildford Diocese, we have 12 Deaneries; the smallest has 10 churches, whilst the largest has 23. As we now have the email details for almost all of the contacts in the survey, this should not be too onerous a task.

Conclusions

We now have a much better picture of the music resources in churches throughout the Diocese. Many musicians and incumbents welcomed the survey and the chance to 'network'. The results suggest that whilst our programme is of interest to some affiliates, we should carefully consider what we provide in the future. We have an opportunity to provide a programme that not only meets the needs of all our affiliates, but also attracts new members. It is also essential that we maintain regular (if occasional) contact with all those who participated in the survey, so that the RSCM becomes more widely known for its mission, which is to encourage and inspire:

- the good use of music, especially in Christian worship;
- the highest standards appropriate to each individual church and community, taking into account their resources and circumstances;

- a culture of learning through practice, experience and reflection, leading to the development of both skills and understanding;
- individuals to engage in education and training in order to serve their church and community, and to fulfil the RSCM's mission in their own work and worship.

In respect of the survey itself, there are almost certainly improvements that could be made, and questions that could have been asked. We did however manage to capture an enormous amount of useful data from (usually) short conversations with the respondents. Furthermore, our main intention was to start a dialogue with the churches of the Diocese, with a view to providing future events that meet their needs. In that respect, our aims have been achieved.

Ian Church, May 2009

Attachments

Survey questionnaire (1 page)

Results for the Diocese (3 pages)

Example of Deanery results (Epsom - 2 pages)