My name is Norman Conder. I was born in 1948

I am Maggie Conder, and I was born in 1949. I have always lived in Suffolk.

How did you first find St Margaret’s?

M We came to St Margaret’s as we lived in the parish and wished to have our daughter baptized. I was already confirmed and had been in my village church.

N I hadn’t been confirmed or baptized and I hadn’t had any interest in the church at all. The vicar at the time, Chris Gane, put down a very gentle but strong challenge which took me slightly by surprise and I found myself having to answer his question very honestly and respond to it. The question was ‘was I interested in Christianity?’ His gentle challenge turned into a ‘yes I am interested in Christianity’ and ‘yes, I would be happy to come to some Christian classes he was running to explain to me more about the whole issue. I probably surprised myself by getting involved but I felt strongly that this was a challenge and something I should get involved with rather than just push my daughter into it with me having no particular real interest in it, or belief in it myself.

M You were baptised in November and Catherine was baptized in July.

N By Bishop John Waine. Not a name you would forget. A wonderful bishop, yes, it was very interesting.

Is there a way of remembering the baptism?

M Yes we used to have a candle in a little box, so to speak. And it had the date and everything on the back, and you get a certificate as well but the vicar at the time always suggested that on the anniversary of the baptism, you did get it out, light it and say a prayer. And as the child got older explain that’s what it was about.

If I just go on to our second child – obviously because we were then members of St Margaret’s, so when we said can we have him baptized. Yes, of course you can! But I remember when he was about seven some children were going to be baptized, we had a swimming pool in St Margaret’s School then, a little tiny swimming pool, and they were being immersed and he was really cross that we had had him baptised as a baby because he wished that he had made that decision himself rather than as a baby.

So you have become very much involved in the church and particularly with the baptism team?

M Yes, that was not until – maybe it is 10 years now. It feels a long time.

 *Baptism team?*

N I was particularly interested in the men. I’d like to think I knew roughly where some of those men stood in wanting to step back, and let the wife do all the involvement, but I wanted them to understand it and not just push their wives to get on with baptisms. I could understand where they were coming from and I just wanted to reassure them that they could be more involved and that this was the right path.

M When we first started doing it we used to have two meetings. And the first session everybody would always be on their guard. What are they coming to ask us? What are they going to make us to commit to? So we would talk about having your child baptised means? We’d show a little DVD, about God’s grace, and how we are all loved by him. Anyway, that was the breaking ice. And then the second one, we’d go through the service, the actual service of the promises you make and the confirmation you make, what you will do and then we’d ask if there are any questions.

M And also the practicalities – we will reserve seats for you, the vicar will do this and you will do that

M And then I went to another church and they were doing a baptism tea, where people would come, who were having their children baptised. And the vicar would give a talk and show a DVD and they had different people from the church in as well to talk to them. I took that back to our vicar and said this could work. So first of all we tried that in our church centre, and I went with the children into the other room, but then that got a bit noisy. And that just didn’t work very well, and then, we brought it into church.

M So we’d do the tea and coffee and cake and chat informally and David then does a DVD and a talk. He does the whole thing in one session.

N We’ve initially gone to people’s homes or invited them to our home and tried to make it very relaxed with perhaps a glass of wine and have two sessions. As time has moved on and the practice has changed, they are now coming into the church where the baptism happens. They are shown the font, they are shown a video. It’s on more neutral territory, as it were, rather than in our home or their homes. Coming back into church seems to be a much better arrangement.

N The style has changed somewhat but coming back into the church seems to be a much better arrangement in people understanding the logistics of it all and David will, point out the font and what it means and the symbolism. So it’s not a surprise when they turn up, they have already visited the church and met you, so it’s more familiar.

Can you tell me something about what you’ve learned about the symbolism?

M We come in the South Door and you come to the font first, that is the first thing you come to so then when you come in, you are baptised in the water and then you go up into the church which faces east so you are starting your new life in being a Christian…so our font is actually big enough for a small baby to be submerged, a full immersion as they would call it. No one in our time has done it.

It is an octagonal, eight-sided font. And it means although you count Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday and Sunday… and you come back to that eighth one and that is the Resurrection Sunday and that is obviously what baptism is all about. It is because Jesus was raised up into newness of life and therefore that is what you are asking for your child to have, eternal life.

It’s really the candle and the anointing. That is anointing the child with the sign of the cross with the water, which is blessed water. As he wets the child head you are meant to be changing from your sinful life to your new life, so you are being renewed. And then the candle is the light that Jesus brings in to this life and it’s new life, because it is everlasting life, and you give the candle so you can relight it. And David now reads out the commission.

But has that been done previously?

M Maybe it’s 100 years ago it was done. They believed that unless you were actually put through the water, you were not cleansed. Some people have this perception of how important that is.

M I think people dress them differently now. Before you used to have flowing gowns, now people wear what they feel comfortable in.

Is there anything special about the font itself?

M

M Long ago you would have a baby baptised because there was so much incidence of infant death. David still says, if you feel you can’t make these promises, you can have a service of thanksgiving, .

N My experience is that when people want their child baptised, when they want their child christened, whichever term you use, for a lot of them it’s a rite of passage. They feel it should be done and that’s why we try to encourage and just make them think a little more about how it is.

How would you describe the baptism service today from 30 years ago?

M Very different. When our children were baptised, it was in a service that had communion. So it was at least an hour long, the service.

And it was a dedicated service?

M No, because all baptisms are in a service, we don’t do ones outside a service because you are being welcomed into the family of the church.

N It has to be witnessed by the congregation ie Christian congregation. Some people have been a little surprised sometimes when they’ve wanted it on a Saturday – no, it has to be within the service of the church in front of everybody and witnessed by everybody and welcomed by the congregation and sometimes I think people haven’t quite taken that on board until it’s been explained.

What have you witnessed in terms of people who have embraced the church as a result of bringing their child to church?

N I’d like to think of the people who have that slight sort of, not fear, but standing away from it, and not wanting to get involved, I’d like to think that by befriending them in our preparation and them seeing David and relaxing everything down a bit and explaining things, that they may want to continue to come to the church. Some have, some don’t but I think it’s very important to make people feel welcomed and comfortable and to explain exactly what is going on. And that we’re here to support them in that sense. You also don’t know what seeds it’s sown, later in life they’ll know they had a friendly welcome. But as you say, we hope that one day they will come back or go to a different church.

N The most important thing, and St Margaret’s has down through the years been a welcoming church, with a lot of people very ready to step forward and talk to you and help you along the way if necessary. It’s always been like that.

End

Highlights 3m 26s