

## St Andrew's Church APCM 2016 – Parish Priest's report

I was licenced as Associate Priest of St Andrew's on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2015 and had to hit the ground running with the Christmas celebrations being followed hard on their heels with Lent and Easter. I am just beginning to draw breath. I should record that I have been carried through by wonderful people. First among equals in this regard are Sue and Felicity, who as churchwardens have worked incredibly hard to support me, and to do much more besides, and who have been a joy to work with. They are wise and wonderful people. But there have been many others who have been terrific too, who have kept me on the straight and narrow where necessary, and cheerfully tried out crazy new things I have suggested and made many of them actually work. So thank you to you all. And a big thank you too just for the welcome you have given Lizzie and me. You have made us feel at home here, and we are very grateful.

And so to my report.

The easy part is saying what I have found. There are huge strengths here, eloquent testimony to the church having been well run by both laity and clergy over very many years. Numbers attending are pretty good and the buildings are in good shape. The worship is orderly and the music uplifting. There are home groups and pastoral care. There are active and willing volunteers taking on all sorts of roles. There are some good community links. All in all, a positive picture, and I thank God for you all and for all that you do. The light of Christ is burning bright in this place.

But that is not to say that all is rosy. We all know the gaps because they are visible every Sunday: there are many fewer children and young people than we would like to see, very few young adults, and many more women than men. The number of newcomers to our church family in the last few years – that is people who have become regulars - is very low indeed. The gentle drift in our congregation seems to me to be out not in, and that drift out is only partly the result of infirmity and mortality. We need to recognise that as things are going we are not bringing the unchurched and the dechurched into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

So, looked at realistically, there is a mixed picture. Undoubtedly lots and lots of good things happening. But the demographics and the trends paint a slightly ominous picture. We are, if you like, in a lovely patch of bright sunlight in a delightful meadow, but there are most definitely storm clouds in the sky.

It follows that we have a choice.

We could just carry on entirely as we are with only the gentle evolution that the passing of time and the changing of personnel inevitably brings. If we do so, St Andrew's will still be the terrific place that it is for many years to come. But in 20 years those who are now in their 50s will know and say that the past was a much better place for the church. And they will be speaking the truth. So, stay still and enjoy what we have whilst it lasts - that is one choice, but we would need to understand where that is taking us.

Or we can resolve to do everything in our power to work against the trends of the past and do all we can to spread the good news of our Saviour Jesus Christ widely in Stapleford. That is certainly the choice I would wish us to make, and I know that most of you would like to do so too. The issue is as to what that means in practice.

Assuming that we want to go down this route, I have in mind three principles to guide us as we go forwards.

The principles are that we need to honour the past, navigate change (I could equally well have said negotiate change), and build for the future.

Honouring the past means understanding where we have come from and maintaining and continuing the core identity of the church that has brought it to the present in good shape.

What is that core identity? St Andrew's main Sunday act of worship is traditional central Anglican in character, and it is liturgical and Eucharistic. We have a strong musical tradition and our main act of worship is led by a robed choir. These things are important to those who have been at the centre of St Andrew's for these past many years, and will remain the routine way we do things at the main Sunday morning service. That will continue unless and until there are very compelling reasons to change. You will already have noticed slight adjustments in the liturgy and in the balance of music between old and new. I know that for a few even these modest changes are disturbing, but they are necessary if we are to build the church up, and there may be more such tinkering. What I can say is that the essence of what we do at that service seems to me to be at the core of the church's identity and needs to be honoured and stay unaltered. Moreover we have a core eldership of very able, long-standing and devoted church servants, and their contribution, experience and skills is and will remain central to what we do. All of that is under my heading 'honouring the past'. We treasure it and build on it; we don't chuck it out.

My second principle is that of navigating change. Navigating change starts with the acceptance that change is inevitable, not least because the world around us changes and as those who are called to proclaim Christ afresh in each generation it is our task to understand and respond to that external change by presenting Jesus in ways appropriate for today.

I am conscious that I have already changed the style of much of the preaching to the more expository style beloved of evangelicals. This is the tradition from which I come, but that in itself is not a good reason to pursue this style of preaching. Rather, I am doing it because I believe that conversion to Christ and the transformation of lives that comes from following Christ can only be powered by a close and Spirit-filled study of God's word, and making a conscious attempt to apply it to our lives individually and communally. I want to continue in that vein, and make the exposition and application of a small portion of God's word central to all our acts of worship. To that end it is my hope to see top class visiting preachers, both women and men, come to St Andrew's, and also to develop a group of good lay preachers from within our number.

That change, in preaching style, is very much afoot. Another substantial change which we need to consider is what to do on Sunday evenings. This has to be on our agenda for wider consultation, both with the Sunday evening congregation and others. I have not consulted yet, other than a few informal conversations, so no decisions have yet been made, but my thinking so far is this. Our Sunday offering taken as a whole is very traditional, and does not really reach out to those who are unchurched, that is, those with no direct Christian or church experience. Indeed, we need to acknowledge the reality that for those without church experience our unleavened traditional offering may actually be off-putting. Perhaps I am wrong, but, again, I cannot see newcomers in our congregations.

I have already said that the core identity of our main Sunday service needs to stay as it is. The same goes for the 8 am service. It is reasonably well-attended, and has some mission potential to an older demographic as it is. That leaves the Sunday evening services to consider. Although those services are well-liked by those who come to them, and I do recognise that, they are generally poorly attended. That applies to both our evensongs and our evening communions. And when we have a Sunday evening BCP communion the reality is that the numbers who want to take communion are miniscule. It may be that another very different form of service in this slot would meet wider needs of a different demographic group, whose needs are not presently being met at all by our otherwise traditional fare. This is a situation we have to consult on and contemplate and pray about in weeks and months to come.

What other changes are we going to have to navigate?

We need to pay more attention to our mission to children and young people. Families have been voting with their feet. I am not talking about our junior church, which is well run, and I applaud what is being done there. Nor am I talking about SSYI and the youth club, both of which are great but it is not their purpose to do core mission, that is to tell people about Jesus. The fact is that many existing Christian families in Stapleford choose not worship with us, and, partly as a consequence of the loss of vitality that has resulted from that, we are not reaching families who have not yet heard the good news of Christ. There is a whole spectrum of possible out of church gospel work with families, children and young people that churches undertake. We need to take our pick and start some, starting small. But I stress that the church's offering in this regard must always involve the gospel. This might be the biggest change we have to navigate here, a change from reticence to boldness. It is our task to present Jesus as part of what we do. That might sometimes be very low key, and sometimes the main focus, but it must be there.

That is children and youth work. There are many other areas of possible change to consider too, some obvious, such as improving our online presence, and others which will emerge more clearly with time.

All of which brings me to my third principle. I have talked about honouring the past and navigating change. The third principle is that we must build for the future. I am not talking about the possibility of some internal re-ordering or of building projects, though these may be important and may come about, nor of tweaks to our offering on Sundays or at other times, nor of starting this project or that, but of building capacity over time. A lot of the navigating change I have talked about, and other ideas that come up, will of course be to do with things we already have capacity to do now, or this season, or this year. But we need to think longer term than that, in, I think, at least two ways.

Firstly, although St Andrew's is a church blessed with many people with great gifts there has been significant reliance, over-reliance even, on a small and very committed group administering the affairs of the church and its day to day practicalities. I thank God for them and bless them for all they do. But back up options and succession planning are desperately needed in all sorts of practical areas. That is one aspect of building for the future. Each of us bears part of the responsibility here. Many of us need to ask 'what can I help with?' But a more important question for those already involved is 'who can I ask to help me with this task?' 'Who can I ask to help me with this task?' is a capacity-building question. It is often easier to do a task yourself once you know how to do it, but

this question needs to be asked even if you don't think you need help, because otherwise our capacity will not grow but will gradually fade.

But another aspect of building for the future is more fundamental, and it is to do with building our spiritual, rather than our practical, capacity – though in truth the two are never far apart in a church context. Our spiritual capacity is to do with the numbers of people able to take on those tasks that we might more obviously categorise as spiritual rather than simply practical. I see the main such tasks as preaching and teaching from the bible, leading services, leading prayers both in services and informally, planning worship, and pastoral visiting and praying for others in pastoral contexts. We need to develop more capacity in all these areas. If we don't, our lack of capacity will inhibit our growth and we will be unable to disciple enquirers and fulfil our mission to Stapleford.

So, honour the past, navigate change, and build for the future. Or, if you like, remember what got us here, but adapt and progress in ways we need to, and think long term.

Overall, I have to say that I am full of hope. St Andrew's has been brought to this point in excellent shape by the laity and clergy who have gone before and by many who are still present and active. If we get this right, then I believe that there is every prospect that many more will be brought to Christ and our numbers will increase over the next few years. It will take prayer and hard work and experimentation, and a willingness to try and fail and try again, but I believe we are well placed to try.

Every blessing, Simon