

## **St Andrew's Church APCM 2017 – Parish Priest's report**

The year and 4 months in which I have had the huge privilege of being your parish priest have passed in something of a blur. We have been through two Christmases and two Easters together, and a whole summer season. Lizzie and I love it here, and we hope to be here for many more years. As I begin my report it is right to record once again that I owe huge thanks to a very hardworking group who keep everything in the church going week on week, but more even than last year, were that possible, I am in debt to and grateful to Sue Brown and Felicity Cooke whose calmness, patience and wisdom in dealing with me are remarkable and much appreciated. I am, as I say, in their debt, and so is the whole church. I am also grateful to Simon Talbott, our priest in charge, for his gentle supervision and wise advice. It has been invaluable. Pam Reed has also been greatly supportive in stepping up to the plate to take services regularly and helping out wonderfully with some pastoral care. We are lucky to have had her for these past many years, and I am grateful to her.

This past year has seen an awful lot happening. I believe and hope that I have followed the three principles I set out last year, principles which, incidentally, I borrowed from elsewhere. You may recall them if I restate them: honouring the past, navigating change, and building for the future.

As to honouring the past we are still, and will remain for the foreseeable future, a church serving the whole village, whose main Sunday morning act of worship is traditional central Anglican in character, liturgical and Eucharistic, and led by a robed choir. That will remain our routine offering, though not necessarily invariable on particular weeks, unless and until we corporately decide it is time to change. Likewise the pattern of our festival celebrations has been tweaked but not changed fundamentally. I hope that if you look back 5 or 10 years then what we are doing today is essentially familiar.

Let me turn to what has been happening in our Sunday services. What has been changing?

In the past year, our main Sunday services have featured short sermon series on Paul's prayers, on Every Member Ministry, on the Grace of Giving, and on the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, all of which I hope has been stimulating, edifying and enjoyable. We have enjoyed a handful of fine visiting preachers. Changes include a reduction in the number of

readings, and I have attempted, within the constraints of our tradition, to make services a little more modern and more accessible to newcomers, and we will continue that process of evolution. We have slightly tweaked our musical offering to adjust the balance between old and new - or at least between old and stuff written in the last 50 years - and we have begun to use a slightly wider range of instruments in our worship. The addition of a beat box on Mothering Sunday did not cause the roof to fall in, and was in fact very well received, and we will continue with such experiments. John Clenaghan and I now meet each month to plan ahead, and that will continue. I am hugely grateful to John for his hard work and expertise.

We have also worked hard to make our All Age services accessible to and inclusive of children in all sorts of ways. I am very grateful to Mary Cooper and Zac Britton, and indeed to John, for their huge input in that task. This is and will continue to be really important if we are going to be, as we must be, a friendly place for children and young people. There are very few tasks in corporate worship which children and young people cannot carry out as well as adults, and we must allow and encourage them to do so, particularly in the context of that All Age service. We have recast our baptism service and will continue to try out the modern liturgy, probably for the remaining baptisms this year, before reviewing the position.

The 8 am service remains unchanged, save that we now have a sermon at it on most Sundays.

The evening service also remains largely unchanged, save that on the fourth Sunday of each month we are now hosting *Connect*, a short informal service for the whole area suitable for anyone from about age 9 upwards.

We also introduced alternative Saturday worship, *Live@5*. I thought it was good and that the team did a really fine job, but it clearly did not quite take off. I am grateful to those who stepped up to have a go, and I am confident that we learnt a lot together in the attempt.

We have also updated the pew sheet, of course, which was not as easy a task as it sounds. More changes to our services may be coming, in particular to our Sunday evening offering, though change could affect other services too. You will remember filling in a questionnaire

about our services a couple of months ago. The results have been collated and considered by the PCC, which has set up a sub-group to suggest possible ways forward. All being well that group will report back to the PCC in June, and a suggested plan will be produced on which there will be a further consultation with the whole church before any changes are implemented either later this year or early next.

Outside our Sunday services we have been reviewing the nuts and bolts of how we run. I should stress that the fact that all this has been necessary is not an implied criticism of what has gone before. Any institution needs to review the way it works from time to time, and having a new parish priest in post was the ideal time to do that here.

So we have changed our insurer to Ecclesiastical. We have got the management of the church finances in order. This was a significant task which Sue very largely undertook, latterly with Chris Bow as our new treasurer, and we have moved as much as possible of our banking online, another task which was not as easy as it sounds. I recognise that sometimes even small changes like that cause real discomfort. In any event we are now confident that we understand the church's financial position at any given point in time. In addition, we have taken steps to bring our church governance into line with statutory requirements, again a process that causes some discomfort.

As well as these nuts and bolts matters there have been a number of other changes going on.

One is that we have renewed old links with Ridley Hall, and are enjoying have Russ Morgan and his family with us for the year. They move on in June, and I am hopeful that we shall have another ordinand next year. It is too early to say, but we will, in any event, continue to foster that link. It is good for us as a church family to be training others.

Another change has been the start of the St Andrew's Children's Society Partnership. I am hopeful that the great work being done and the foundations now being established by Rob Needle and his team will bear long term fruit in terms of our mission in England outside the parish in the way that the Link has as the key component of our overseas mission.

And last but not least in terms of major changes in the last year, we have employed Zac – half time for us, and half time for SSYI. Zac has been and will continue to be a great blessing for us and for Stapleford. His work in youth groups, on youth parties, and working in conjunction with SSYI, and his planned bible study group and youth camp will, in years to come, bear great fruit. We are beginning to be bold, and we should rejoice in that.

So, we have honoured the past, and will continue to do so. And we have been introducing change, and will continue to do so.

The third principle was of building for the future, and you may recall that I was particularly concerned with building our capacity for leadership and for the sorts of tasks that one might categorise as spiritual rather than simply practical. That is not an adequate distinction, but what I had in mind is tasks such as preaching and teaching from the bible, leading services, leading prayers, planning worship, pastoral visiting, and praying for others in the context of pastoral visits.

As you have heard we do now have a pastoral care group, very well led by Joan King, to monitor, encourage, supervise and develop our pastoral care offering. The functioning of this group is at an early stage, but I think it is both a necessary and exciting development, with real potential for creative pastoral outreach.

Other than that, we have not made huge progress on this aim. What the PCC and I have done is to institute a review of our succession planning in key posts, which is now gently underway. Again, there is the slight discomfort that even discussion of change brings, but it is vital for the health of the church that those who have been in post a long time hand over responsibilities in an orderly way, and do so before it actually becomes necessary for them to do so, and it is important that younger people get their chance to grow into leadership roles in the church.

I also intend, over the next year, to begin the process of refreshing the list of those leading our services and corporate prayers, by giving suitable people the chance to have a go. Some who have been doing these tasks for some time may need to step away and take on other responsibilities instead, again to allow others to grow in their ministry. And as ever, we - by

which I mean each of us - need actively to encourage some younger people to take up these roles.

In the same vein, that of building our capacity, in the Autumn it is likely that we will have a Sunday or two devoted to vocational training opportunities, really another aspect of the Every Member Ministry series we had last year. A healthy church should have people in formal training for lay or ordained ministry, as well as plenty stepping up to the plate to take on spiritual leadership roles in an informal way.

And finally in relation to this aspect I am conscious that my good intentions to build up our corporate prayer life and opportunities for small group discipleship have not yet had any follow through from me. The intentions remain just that.

So that is where we are on the principles I outlined last year. Perhaps of more interest, however, is how we are now going to plan ahead for future change and future capacity building, whilst at the same time honouring our past. There is a certain sense in which church life is and probably should be chaotic. We are a family of many people with different priorities, functioning missionally and pastorally in a fluid real life setting. Given how busy everyone is, there is always an awful lot of last minute activity around any event, and a certain amount of creative chaos.

But amidst it all we do need to take a long view. With that in mind, over the next few months I am going to be asking the leaders of each of our activities to formulate, with their groups, some longer term thinking. The purpose will be to promote mission and discipleship. We can use the diocesan tags 'Engage, Grow, Deepen' if you like, but in the end it all comes down to mission and discipleship. How do we bring more people to Christ? And how do we help people to grow in their faith? We will ask simple questions like: What are the particular issues this area of our work – whichever it is that we are considering - now faces? Where do we want it to be in five years? How are we going to get there? I remember being very struck, some years ago, by the truth of the idea that you shouldn't overestimate what you can achieve in 6 months – that way lies disappointment – but equally that you shouldn't underestimate what can be achieved in 5 years by small, incremental changes.

Let me take some examples to show you what I mean.

The children in our church family are nurtured beautifully and I think they and their families feel valued and loved. But we know that the numbers attending each Sunday are low. We also know that there is now little link between the church and the St Andrew's toddler group, notwithstanding its name. We know that our relationship with the school, whilst very friendly, and I rejoice in that, is nonetheless based on relatively little contact. These are some of the issues facing our children's work. Now, what do we want it to look like in 5 years? What specific small steps do we need to take, one by one, to improve the position? How do we develop this aspect of our mission? Let's plot the pathway to get there. We may end up taking a different route and coming to a different end, of course. But let's be intentional about our journey forwards. And our youthwork needs the same approach.

Or take our music. We have a very fine musical tradition which I love and which we want to keep. But there are issues. Recruitment to the choir and junior choir is difficult. We have been trying, so we know that. We usually have an adequate turn out of the choir for Sunday mornings, but it is sometimes a bit thin. Our evensongs and sung communions do not get anything like a full choir, not even one person on each part. And even really important midweek services like Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday have not had a choir this year. These things are quite worrying and make the fine musical tradition look a bit precarious. So we have issues that need tackling. Again, where do we want to be, musically, in 5 years, and how are we going to get there? What is the mission or discipleship focus of our music and how do we bring it to life? Do we need more opportunities for individual vocal training to attract more people? Do we need choral scholars? Perhaps a wider musical life involving more instruments? More events with outside professionals like the Palm Sunday evening event? A Saturday music school? I have no idea what the answers are, but we need to formulate a plan and move intentionally.

Or take our various home groups. There are still a couple I have not visited despite my best intentions, which is an awful thing to confess, but even so I know that the groups are doing great things. But they are not growing and dividing and growing and dividing again, and it would be great to see that, at least in some of them. So again we need that little bit of longer term forward planning. How can growth and the spread of discipleship be achieved?

Or take the work of our Events committee. It does superb work putting on events that cement our fellowship, and that is really important. But we struggle to develop events with a missional focus, events that outsiders might come to and at which they might hear something of the gospel. So what's the plan to become more mission focussed? What steps should we take?

And the same sort of approach needs to be applied to our men's work, to our pastoral work, to our mission work outside the parish, in fact to every single area of our church life. What I think we need to do now is lift our eyes up to the horizon. Although I have talked about where we want this aspect or that aspect of our work to be in 5 years, and how we are going to get there, the real issue is how we are going to ensure that we carry out the task of telling people in this village and beyond about Jesus, and then helping them to grow in their faith. That is what we are here for.

Of course, if all goes well, then in 5 to 10 years the side benefit will be that the future of this church will be assured for the next several years. I talked last year about the need to make a choice between maintaining the status quo and watching the inevitable slow decline of the church, or doing everything we could to buck the trends that have sunk so many churches and do all we can to spread the good news of our Saviour Jesus Christ widely in Stapleford and beyond. My sense is that this year we have made the choice and are already taking the second course. It has not been entirely painless for everyone, I know that, and there are still difficulties ahead. But it is the right choice, and having made it I am determined that we shall follow it through. My view is that Stapleford is a very needy place, and that what it needs, now as much as ever, is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Every blessing, Simon