

## **St Andrew's Church APCM 2018 – Parish Priest's report**

Lizzie and I have now been with you for three Christmases and Easters, and feel well-bedded in.

It has been a pretty amazing year. As a church we are finding ways to be faithful to our mission to tell the good news of Jesus Christ to as many people in our community as possible. There is always more we can do, or things we can do differently, and we are in a period of change. Such periods can be difficult. But it has been a fantastic year, in all sorts of ways. I want to start with some highlights.

The most spectacular highlight has been the growth in our younger children's work. The influx of children and their parents into services after some of the Messy Church sessions has been astonishing and uplifting, and it is having knock on effects our ordinary junior church, and on the number of younger adults coming to other services. I am so grateful to Mary Cooper and the whole team for all their efforts in taking our children's work forward. If this development continues as it has started it will have effects that ripple outwards into all sorts of areas of our church life, not least the way we do All Age services. People are coming in to the church family by an entirely different route from any we have been used to, with an entirely different set of expectations as to what church is. This will bring its challenges, but is undeniably a very good thing.

Our youth work has also made excellent progress, though less spectacular. The Connect services, still not quite a year old, are gaining traction gradually, we now do have a church youth group on Sunday evenings, and a bigger Friday youth club than hitherto. We have had a youth barbecue in the vicarage garden, a camping trip away, and other trips locally. Like Connect, these are small beginnings with slow growth, but this is still a highlight for me because good signs are there. Zac is doing marvellous work.

Our music has also provided highlights. Two for me were the Rutter Requiem, and the first of our new series of full Choral Evensongs at All Souls'. The Rutter Requiem was terrific. For the performance of the Ruttter Requiem, the core was our own choir, and we also provided some of the ensemble. It is a great compliment to our in house music that some outstanding outside musicians were happy to come and perform with us. The performance drew in lots of visitors who never otherwise experience the church. Events like this, in which we partner with external musicians, build up our own in-house confidence, expertise and capacity. They are part of our developing strategy to make sure that our own musical tradition remains vibrant.

I am really encouraged by the way our church music is going. John Clenaghan and Sarah Needle are doing wonderful stuff and I am very grateful to them. We are all well aware of the challenges of

recruitment to our choir and junior choir, of course, and we keep working on that, but every week I hear something at least that lifts the spirits and turns us to God.

Our worshipping life has included other great things too. The Christmas services seemed particularly memorable this year. Christingle, for example, was absolutely heaving. Another particular highlight for me was being alongside Pam as she presided on Christmas Day – more poignant now that we know she is unlikely to do so again. I am so grateful to Pam for her support since I have arrived. Celebrating 40 years of her ministry a few months back was huge fun, and in a couple of weeks time we shall celebrate her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her active ministry will draw to a close, but her contribution to our church life so far will be long and gratefully remembered.

As regards our preaching we have had sermon series the Reformation, on Jesus at the beach, and latterly working our way through parts of Mark's gospel. We have been able to attract a good variety of visiting preachers. We have been lucky to receive Petra Shakeshaft, now vicar in Hinxton, Jamie Hawkey, the Dean of Clare College – I think his sermon on John the Baptist crying 'make straight the way of the Lord' was the best we have had all year - Bishop Stephen who preached at our St Andrew's Day service, Archdeacon Alex Hughes, Martin Cockerill from the Free Church, Rob Taylor from the diocese, Monica Cameron, curate of St Mary's Great Shelford, and of course a good number of visits from our own Simon Talbott. His support, wise counsel and encouragement remain invaluable to me.

As well as those preachers we have begun to hear from Sophie Young – what a huge pleasure it is for us to have her as our ordinand – and from Romie Ridley and Alastair MacGregor. A church should have its own team of lay preachers and we are beginning to develop one. In bringing them forward, with their very different styles, and in inviting others from outside, my aim is to ensure that we hear a variety of voices, with a variety of styles and different takes on the bible, because that is good for us.

In the same vein – again more highlights – we have had the first outings of some new service leaders. Suzanne Watt, and, from our youngsters, Grace and Stella, have all brought a freshness to the morning services they have led which has been great, and Liz Megson and Joan King have stepped up to the plate and led some evenings services. In fact young people took all the leading roles in our services for Harvest Festival and Mothering Sunday, and did so brilliantly. There is, incidentally, no element of a patronizing 'didn't they do well' in that remark. I was reminded by all they did that one of our tasks as adults is to invite the young people in to the very centre of what we do in our worshipping community, and as active participants not just observers.

With these successes in mind I am going to go on increasing the diversity of those who lead our services and take other active roles in them. This is particularly important as new people come in to the church. From time to time they must see, at the front and taking active roles, people with whom they might identify. This is now, I believe, a missional imperative.

So, lots of highlights, all wonderful stuff. We should feel really encouraged. I am so grateful to God, and to all those who contribute so much.

First among equals in that regard are, of course, Sue and Felicity. They have done an astonishing variety and number of tasks, often ably and willingly assisted by others, but nonetheless carrying a huge burden themselves. An important part of their role is personal to me. I have needed and really valued their counsel, their critical friendship, and their encouragement through difficulties. I am hugely grateful to them both. My particular thanks to Sue as she steps down. Sue has a marvellous ability to cut to the chase, and is imaginative, creative and kind. I could go on, but really all I need to say is 'thank you, Sue, from the bottom of my heart.'

So, we are a vibrant church in which wonderful things happen. I have spent time making sure we remember that, because it is worth remembering in a phase of our life in which we are undergoing change. It is also a prelude to looking at some slightly less cheery background data.

May I begin this section of my report with the important matter of the vicarage asparagus bed. Planted last year, as you may recall, and all 12 roots produced shoots last year, but the gardeners among you will know that we were not allowed to eat them. Nor will we be eating our own asparagus this year, though there are already some very delicious looking shoots emerging. And we will only take some of the crop next year. The idea is to let the roots build up, so that a really good crop can be harvested for years on end. It will be 2020 before we really get to enjoy the growth. In the meantime we need to go on feeding and weeding and admiring the shoots, confident that good things are happening beneath the surface.

To look at what is happening beneath in relation to the church we need to turn to our church statistics. So called 'statistics for mission' have to be reported each year for each church. I do not know when this system began, but you can find ours going back to 2006 on the Ely Diocese website, or I can provide you with them. What they show, when you add the figures for 2016 and 2017 to those that are publicly available, is that the number of people attending St Andrew's has been in pretty unremitting decline, with occasional blips in the data, since 2006. The number now attending on a usual Sunday, an ordinary day, is now around 90. It was about 170 in 2006. That is a huge reduction in just 12 years in a 1,000 year history. Moreover, the age of those attending is increasing

– again, a marked change. That is the hard data. These trends were certainly continuing through 2017.

I don't want us to get hung up on statistics, but we would be foolish to ignore them. I said two years ago that we faced a choice. We could, I said, go on as before, not changing anything, but that if we did that the church would die. The statistics make that clear. The alternative I set out two years ago was to decide to do everything we could to buck the prevailing trends and determine to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to everyone we could in Stapleford and beyond. Last year I reported that I thought we had already decided on the second course. This year I am sure of it, and I am sure that in many ways we have already set ourselves on the right course. All those highlights – and I could have listed more – prove it. But – and now you can see why I spoke about my asparagus bed - I am equally sure that we will not see real change in our underlying statistics until the 2019 figures are reported in 2020. Indeed, we may see further decline in the statistics this year, reporting in 2019, as the effect of changes in our evenings services are seen. We will not see real fruit from that in the short term.

So we are entering a period in which we need to give thanks to God for the highlights and signs of good things to come, and to hold our nerve. The weeding and feeding needs to go on, because by doing so we will strengthen the roots. Watch for and rejoice in signs of growth, of course, but don't expect a full harvest just yet.

In some ways I don't think this waiting is going to be difficult, because there are obvious and encouraging signs of new things happening. Messy Church is the obvious example, but with this and all our various ventures we just need to stick with them and keep supporting them, and we are going to see amazing things happen.

Part of that prayerful work we need to do is, of course, reflected in the changes already underway.

Our review of our services, which took pretty well two years, ended with the PCC adopting most but not all of the recommendations of the working group. The green flier that has been available for a while explains the outline of what has been decided.

Our evening services are the main focus of change. From May we will have one Evensong per month, including full Choral Evensongs two or three times a year, on the first Sunday. We are confident that we should be able improve the musical quality of these traditional services by reducing the number of them, and we hope that the congregation will gradually build. But even if that does not work out we need to be relaxed about it – although all of us involved made our very best efforts it was already, by reason of death, debility and other factors, a dwindling congregation and the whole

experience was not a good advert for the church nor good mission to those newcomers who occasionally appeared at it.

As to the other Sundays, the Connect services will continue on the fourth Sunday of each month, at 5.30 pm. Other Sunday evening provision will take a while to settle down, and we will spend some months trying out various things. I think we will be moving to a preponderance of informal non-liturgical worship, as a way of best reaching out to those who do not presently come to church at all, but this is clearly a long term project and one area in particular where we need to hold our nerve and continue to wait on the Lord.

There may be more changes in our services to come. Two areas that I think need attention soon are our 8 am service, which will on present trends cease to be viable in 5 to 8 years unless we do something about it, and what to do about our All Age services, which do not in their current form meet the spiritual needs of those we are now working so hard to attract.

The changes to our services that we have seen, and contemplating any future changes, is very much something that requires consultation and takes time. Even with majority support in the church community in favour of the changes we are now implementing – and there was such support – our PCC rightly took its time and debated matters thoroughly. I am delighted and grateful that in this way and others it is engaging with its most important role, which is overseeing the mission of the church here in Stapleford.

One part of that role, one way of keeping us fresh and active, is encouraging new people to step up and become involved in the life of the church, a function we in the PCC have called ‘succession planning’.

What we have seen over the past year is a number of our stalwarts, to each of whom we owe a huge amount, gradually laying down their roles. So for various reasons Joan Barnes, Ken Dean, Mary Spriggs and Philippa Jones, and now Pam Reed and Norman Masey, have all stepped aside from their roles, and others have stepped up in various ways that you know about. It is great to see new people being released to make their own particular contributions. This process will keep rolling on. It has not always been a comfortable process, but I hope it will become a natural expectation for those in roles in the church to work with me and the PCC in planning ahead, and for the process of handing on responsibilities and enabling and encouraging new people to take part to be seen as a joyful part of the privilege of serving in and growing our church community.

And finally, looking ahead, before long you will be hearing more about a review of the church's outreach. A working group has been set up under the leadership of Alastair MacGregor. There will be a wide consultation in some form or other in coming months.

Lots of highlights, some change, and some more to come. That is a summary of where we are.

What is worth understanding as we try to move forwards is this. When it comes to change, any change, there are, on one side, those saying 'too much, too fast' and those on the other saying 'too little, too slow'. And there are extremes: those who oppose any change, and those who want everything to change. Both are wrong, and the statistics I referred to make that clear. The decline in numbers shows that no change is not an option. On the other side, the views of the faithful elderly core, many of whom like things as they are, need to be respected. Part of the keeping our nerve that I have spoken of will be intentionally holding together these disparate views. That means continuing open discussion and plenty of prayer. And in those discussions and when decisions are made, then for those who don't like change it means being prepared to countenance it anyway, even change of things you personally hold dear. And for those who want radical change it means not expecting every possible change to happen, even those you may think incredibly important. I am confident that we will find the right way forwards if we allow ourselves to be encouraged by the highlights, keep a realistic view of where we actually are – that is the statistics – and keep moving things on bit by bit, remembering the whole time that our primary purpose as a church is to let the good news of Jesus Christ be known as widely as possible.

In the past two years we have done a good deal of the dull nuts and bolts work of sorting out our finances and getting our governance right. We have reviewed our services and begun to make changes. We have employed a youth worker and started a number of ventures under his auspices. We have re-energised our children's work. We have renewed links with Ridley Hall. There is more to do, always progress to be made in many areas, but I am full of joy and hope.

Why? Because I believe that what we are doing shows that we as a church understand that our first duty is to take the good news of Jesus Christ to those who do not yet know him. Pretty much everything else we do exists as facets of that task. If we do that, and prayerfully follow where we are led, we will see growth. We need to keep our nerve, and wait on the Lord.

Every blessing to you all, Simon