**St Andrew’s Church APCM 2024 – Vicar’s report**

This is my nineth annual report. That feels like a lot, but Lizzie and I feel very at home here, and don’t have itchy feet.

In these reports my habit has been to review the good things that happened in the previous year, to look honestly at some of the difficulties we have – I think that is important – and to look a little to the future. I am going to do the same again this year.

So, 2023. It is worth looking back, because, as usual, we did some great stuff. Starting outside the church and services, two of the continuing successes are JOY and Little Fishes, for the old and the young in our community respectively. Fiona and Lucinda lead Little Fishes and Romie and Lucinda lead JOY. The teams that lead and help out at these have done a fantastic job in showing Christ’s love to our community, and if you have been to one you will know that Christ is also spoken of, directly and plainly. That is one change we have gently made over the last several years: now, if there is an event that the church runs, Christ is spoken about. To my mind that must always be the case. The church is not here as a social service, but to spread the good news of Christ in word and action together.

JOY and Little Fishes were going on throughout the year. So too was our pastoral care. This too has developed. The wonderful team, led by Romie, has gradually been renewed – faithful long-standing members still contribute significantly but there are a number of new faces, as there needed to be. I am grateful to them all. And prayer and anointing are becoming part of their repertoire, which is as it should be.

Those are all background things going on. Turning to events during 2023, early on I was instituted and inducted as vicar. That was at Candlemas. The Church of England’s machinations that seem to be designed to avoid giving each parish a vicar of its own have to be seen to be believed, but we got there in the end. If you think that it is a good thing for St Andrew’s to have its own vicar – I do - then you owe thanks to those who dug their heels in 25 or 30 years ago to stop the complete absorption of the parish into a bigger entity, so we at least had a good starting point as we made the arguments for separating Stapleford off again. It would be a very bad thing for the church in Stapleford to lose its own identity and to be absorbed into Great Shelford. That plan will rear its head again in the future, I am sure, but we have pushed it away for the present.

During the year we had lots of different sermon series. I enjoyed taking us through the second half of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. That was before Lent. Then after Easter we had a series looking at art and the resurrection. That was fun to do and well-received. We then preached through the Sermon on the Mount – really good to go back to some bible basics in that way – spent the summer with Joseph, dipped into the book of Job, and celebrated the coronation with a series looking at kingship in the bible. I hope that you enjoyed it, and, more importantly, that your faith was stimulated, increased or enlivened.

And we had all the usual things that go to make up the life of St Andrew’s: lovely celebrations of our two mission links, parties, baptisms, weddings and funerals, some wonderful music – I will say more about that in a minute – involvement in the Village Weekend and more. A good year in lots of ways.

The Lord was worshipped, the Word was preached, the sacraments were celebrated and we had enormous fun for all ages all the while.

None of this could have taken place without huge contributions from lots of people. I have already mentioned Fiona, Lucinda and Romie. What great people they are, and how much we owe them.

Romie, of course, is also an assistant churchwarden. In that role she is joined by Margaret Hebden, who does an immense amount particularly in keeping our weekly services going. I am grateful to them both for their work in that role. And I am massively grateful to Alastair MacGregor, who once again has been our sole churchwarden. Alastair’s kindness to me and work for the whole church is outstanding. I am so very thankful for him.

Two other mentions. The problem with mentioning individuals is that you then start missing people out, but I am going to mention Stephen and Sue Brown. Stephen has been chair of our Fabric Committee for some years and keeps us in order in more ways than you can imagine. The fact, for example, that our electrical appliances are checked and are safe, that our lightening rod is checked, that our fire extinguishers would work should we ever need them to do so – all of these sorts of things as well as organising more obvious maintenance and repairs – all that takes place under his leadership, assisted by the Fabric Committee. Grateful thanks to him and them.

And Sue has organised our children’s ministry for some years. It is a large and important task, and Sue has done it brilliantly. At the moment Sue is taking a break from the role and we are having a little re-think, but none of that takes away from the fact that she has been an inspirational and hugely hard-working leader of that team and done great things for us.

And I know, of course, that there are many of you, unsung heroes beavering away behind the scenes, without whom we could not function. Thank you, one and all!

So, lots of good things this year.

But difficulties too, of course. It is a rare year in which there are not difficulties, and it is right to acknowledge them.

One difficulty was with our music. For reasons that many of you know, it became impossible for John Bryden to continue as Director of Music, notwithstanding his huge contribution to the church over the last several years, for which I am genuinely grateful. Few churches are lucky enough to have someone as gifted and enthusiastic as John in post and none of us wanted his tenure to end. But the position of Director of Music is at its heart a spiritual post with a significant role to play, through music, in the spiritual life of a church, and there are some things incompatible with that spiritual leadership. Despite our good will and best efforts it was not possible to change the situation once it developed. But John has gone with our very good wishes, and it is a pleasure still to see him at services occasionally.

Of course, out of adversity, good things can come. That is God’s way of working. One good thing that came out of this was the opportunity for Sarah Needle to step up as Acting Director of Music. She did so utterly fantastically. She inherited a situation in which the choir – all of us really – were a bit shell-shocked, and by loving care and diligence she was able to get our music back on track. She gave us a great 6 months, including the mammoth effort of terrific Christmas celebrations, and I thank God for her.

The other good thing that came out of John’s departure was Tim Kwan’s arrival. To state the obvious, Tim is not John and will be different, but he brings his own particular unique set of gifts, and I am very much looking forward to working with him and seeing how he develops the role of Director of Music as time goes by.

The music, then, was one difficulty. The other major difficulty has been the impossibility of replacing Zoe as youthworker. We have tried and tried, but in common with youthwork organisations and other churches we have found there is a dearth of youthworkers. Or maybe none of us are paying enough. Zoe was great, but as time goes by it gets more and more likely that the foundational work she did is going to need to be re-done. We went through the same re-building process when Zac left – then it was the pandemic that caused the hiatus – so I know we can do it if we have to, though it would have been lovely just to be in a position to build on what Zoe had already done. In any event, Zoe’s departure and Sue Brown stepping back from our children’s ministry is giving us a chance to re-evaluate what we do, and that is a good opportunity which we will not waste.

Other difficulties are on the horizon, or perhaps rather closer. One is that we are suffering from a real lack of volunteers. I mention this not to guilt trip anyone – a wise older vicar told me years ago that guilt was a very bad foundation for any aspect of ministry – so not to guilt anyone, but to be realistic. I am concerned that lots of little jobs, which I keep mentioning, are just not being done unless I pick them up myself. But that is not the main concern. There are two bigger jobs in the offing which simply have to be done. As matters stand we have only one warden, Alastair, and he can only serve one more year. And we have had no volunteers willing to join the Fabric Committee and consider the role of chair of the Fabric Committee when Stephen steps down at the end of this year after a substantial stint. I cannot do those jobs, and actually hand on heart I do not think that I can do the job of being your vicar properly if those jobs are not done.

This lack of volunteers is no doubt for many reasons. Changes in the way society functions, in the world of work and the expectations laid upon those of working age, and more. And it is also the case that, as in the rest of the church our congregational numbers are gently dropping, and that too, to state the obvious, affects the number of volunteers available. We have plenty of good weeks, when the church is full of bounce and life, but I see the numbers from week to week and the trends are pretty clear and are not encouraging. If this continues we will see a number of effects, not just a lack of volunteers. Money will get tighter, against still rising bills, for example, but more jobs will need to be paid for because we have fewer volunteers. Our electoral roll will shrink – next year is a complete revision, and the results of that complete revision may be a bit of a shock. When that happens we may find that our right to be represented in the wider church will contract, because those rights depend on numbers on our roll. And smaller churches are less able to put on a wide and vibrant programme and so remain attractive to a wide spread of people. And so on. I can’t predict all the ripples in the pond, but there will be many.

All this is rather gloomy, I know, but there is no point in an annual report if it is not realistic. What then does the future hold for us?

Essentially I think the best course is to trust in God and hang in there. We will keep on trying to grow, of course. But even if we can’t, we will trust. We may not know what the future will be, but it will be the future God has for us. We will keep doing what we are doing. Keep reaching out to our community. Keep preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments. Keep offering a loving welcome in the name of Christ to all whom we encounter.

When Daniel and his friends were about to be thrown into the fiery furnace for refusing to bow down to a golden idol, Daniel had something to say to the King. He said ‘The God whom we serve can deliver us.’ Daniel was certain of that. And Daniel went on. ‘But even if he does not, we want you to know, your Majesty, that we will not worship your gods, nor serve the image of gold that you have set up.’

I am likewise certain that our God can fill our church. It may or may not be in his good plan to do so. That is up to him. As time goes on I am learning not to worry about numbers, and to trust in God. St Andrew’s is his. We are his. We have our bibles. We have prayer. We have faith in Jesus Christ who loves us and died for us. We have the Holy Spirit. In the end those things are all that we need. All that is required of us is to be faithful, and that we shall do.

Every blessing to you all, Simon