**St Andrew’s Church APCM 2019 – Parish Priest’s report**

In this past year there has been, as always, plenty to reflect on. I think that in time we will look back on it as the year in which we began to turn the face of the church deliberately outwards, more so than it had been before. But I am getting ahead of myself.

There have been some real highlights this year. But it has also been a year with some significant and very particular difficulties which have been very time-consuming and emotionally draining. Some of you will know this already. I considered saying more about them, but have thought better of it. I am willing to discuss them with church members, so far as it would be proper, so please do feel free to ask me, not tonight but another time if you wish. By not dealing with those difficulties here I am not trying to hide anything, but rather to concentrate on giving thanks.

One of the things I am thankful for is Felicity Cooke’s amazing service as church warden. In the highs and lows of the year I have been greatly blessed by having Felicity in that role.

She has been a warden for four years, and she has been incredible. She is clever and kind, down to earth and emotionally astute, challenging and supportive. I don’t think Felicity has ever actually said to me ‘I wonder if that is wise’ but it is exactly the sort of gentle correction she makes. And she has certainly asked ‘how are you?’ and sought a real answer. We have had a very productive partnership. I am so very grateful to her for her service as warden, as I know we all are, and I am particularly grateful for her friendship and counsel this year. It is typical of her that she refused to accept a thank you collection for herself, but has directed our donations to the Multiple Sclerosis Trust, a charity which helps those who, like her sister, suffer that horrible disease. Felicity, thank you!

Any year involves changes. As well as Felicity standing down tonight, during the course of the year Peter Green stood down from leading the Fabric Committee, and Mary Cooper from leading our children’s work. They have each served in these roles for well over 20 years. We offered them our true and heartfelt thanks at the time they stood down, but it is right to mark once again what remarkable service they each gave and how incredibly grateful we are. Good things will continue to happen in both these spheres, but that is only possible because of the excellent state in which they have handed on their responsibilities. Our grateful thanks go to both of them.

We have also just said goodbye to John Clenaghan after five very productive years. I am sorry to have been on holiday for his last Sunday with us. John is a very fine and extremely versatile musician and we will miss him. He covered an extraordinary range of music - from super traditional choral evensongs using the Book of Common Prayer to rocking the gospel at Connect. He is going to be a hard act to replace, but that process is getting under way. I anticipate us being able to make an appointment no later than September and possibly in July or August.

Of all the tasks that can be listed as duties for a new Director of Music my sense is that the most important is having the skills, drive and desire to build up the choir numbers, both adults and children. An analysis of the choir demographics and likely retirements over the next few years makes that the imperative if we are to continue to have the high quality music week to week and the outstanding festivals and special events that we currently enjoy.

And now may I move on to some highlights, because as well as teaching me through the difficulties I have alluded to God has certainly blessed us all with some great things.

You will all know by now that the Community Warden scheme managed by the local branch of Age UK is up and running. We were very pleased to welcome Donna Allsopp, the new warden, to a service a few weeks ago. This is very much a church initiative and would not have happened without the efforts and prayer of our pastoral team. We are grateful for significant funding from the Parish Council, but we are the sponsoring organisation with ongoing responsibilities, and I am determined that the scheme will be known for its association with the church so as to be deliberately, albeit gently, missional. Joan King’s dogged leadership on this has been crucial. Over a year ago I thought the idea was lovely but had no real faith that it would come about. I am pleased to have been proved to be entirely wrong. Stuart Watt also played an important part in bringing the discussions with Age UK to a conclusion. Our thanks go to both Joan and Stuart.

At the other end of the age spectrum our work among children and families is, once again, a particular highlight. We can all see that Messy Church is sometimes bursting at the seams. Sue Brown and the whole team continue to do a terrific job, and they too have our thanks. Interestingly, there was one month earlier this year when more people attended Messy Church than the conventional service held at the same time. The success of Messy Church does raise important issues, and is changing us as a church, as I anticipated last year.

As regards youth work, we now run two church-related youth clubs and two which are essentially secular. The age range that Zac Britton, our youth worker, now covers is really from age 8 or 9 upwards. Those are the new pre-teens. Zac is being successful because he is kind, innovative and persistent, and has gained the respect of parents. I am very grateful to him, and also to Chris and Mary Cooper and Alice Barlow, who have provided particular support.

So our work with children and young people is really most encouraging. But I do want to say that it is quite fragile. It still needs a lot of nurture. It is very dependent on a few people and needs more volunteers. And it will take time before its effects work through more fully into the life of the church.

Our work with children and vulnerable adults raises, of course, the issue of safeguarding. Lisa MacGregor has led us superbly on this issue, making sense of some quite poor material emanating from national and diocesan sources and putting it into effect with quiet determination. I believe our safeguarding processes are now second to none. That too is to be celebrated as a highlight. The idea is to embed a culture of safeguarding because that is one way in which we can love our neighbours as ourselves. As well as thanking and congratulating Lisa for all she has done - and for the grace with which she put up with rather more grumbles than there ought to have been - I should congratulate all those who just got on with what was necessary. There have been only a very few - I can count them on the fingers of one hand - who decided to lay down their roles rather than take part in the safer recruitment procedures required.

I said that I thought this may be remembered as the the year in which we began deliberately to turn the face of the church outwards. That is not to say we have not been outward facing at all in the past, because of course we have, but two more highlights, in addition to the warden scheme to which I have already referred, illustrate what I mean.

The first is the progress on the outreach consultation. For the moment, it suffices to say that it was a really good process with excellent and encouraging engagement. I am grateful to Alastair MacGregor and Felicity Cooke who led much of the preparatory work, and to Jacqui Watkins, Clare Kerr and Romie Ridley who led the focus groups, and indeed to everyone who contributed. It ended with lots of good ideas and constructive thoughts being generated, which the PCC will gradually choose from and bring into action. This will be a long-term process, but one example of an idea already being brought into action is a short one-session course Alastair MacGregor is going to be running on learning to speak naturally about our personal faith. All Christians should be willing and able to give an account of the faith they hold - it is not me that says that but St Peter - so I commend this course to you. It looks very good and we chose it carefully out of quite a wide variety of such courses available because we thought it would suit us here.

The second is the new website, which is now modern and attractive, and easy to update, and contains lots of useful information. One side benefit of the new website, coupled with the GDPR process we went through, is that we now have a proper database as part of the very flexible administration system embedded within the website, which this year we are going to use to standardise and modernise all the various bits of church admin that go on. As for its outward face, the new website represents a distinct change in what we might call ‘advertising style’ from what has gone before, conveying the confidence we should feel that St Andrew’s is a great church in all sorts of ways. I hope it gives everyone the clear impression all are welcome here.

And one more highlight this year was the news that we will have a curate from July. Many of you will already have met Clare Coates. She is going to be working half time, and we are very much looking forward to having her training here. This is a big responsibility for a church. The expectation is that the a newly ordained minister, fresh out of college, spends three years learning with us and is then fit and ready to become the incumbent of her own parish. We are very fortunate that such a great trust has been placed in us.

A little about our services. The first thing to say is that total attendance across all services is holding steady. That is an achievement in itself, given the startling downwards trend visible in the published data going back to 2006. The so-called ‘usual Sunday’ attendance in 2006 was around 170 each week; it is now around 100. And as well as that holding steady, there are areas of real encouragement across very different types of services - so, for example, Messy Church is doing well, but so too, on the whole, are our BCP Evensongs. These are not packed out, but they are better attended now than when we did them more frequently. Connect is also doing well, and the 8 am BCP Communion service is also holding up. These could not be more different, but all are meeting particular needs. And, of course, festival services remain popular. But when you drill down into the total attendance figures they also show unequivocally that our standard 9.45 am services continue to decline markedly in popularity. Increases in other areas are masking that in the overall figures, but we cannot kid ourselves about it. It is, however, an issue for another time.

We continue to attract excellent visiting preachers - including this year Professor Sarah Coakley and Revd Dr Emma Percy celebrating 100 years of women having the vote, Jamie Hawkey the former Dean of Clare College, and Mark Bonney, the Dean of Ely Cathedral - and our festival services and many other special occasions such as choral evensongs went really well, greatly enhanced by excellent music making. We are going to continue in much the same vein with our services this year. We may, when energy and resources permit, continue our evening experimentation, retaining the Evensongs and Connect services, but regarding the other slots as open to trials of other things.

This concludes my review of the past year. As ever, some wonderful things have happened, and we have much for which to be grateful. I now turn to the future.

I do so first by letting those of you who have been following these talks over the last couple of years know that the vicarage asparagus bed is healthy. It came through unexpectedly challenging conditions over the last year with its development perhaps a little slowed, but it is still fine. Now, just in its third year, it is not producing huge numbers of shoots, but there are encouraging signs. I am confident that the work we have done on it - including this year’s weeding and manuring - will yield a good crop for many years to come. Asparagus, like church, is a long term project.

Returning to our concerns here, in the first of my annual reports in 2016 I posed a question. I asked ‘what is our core identity?’ I have to say that at times I have rather regretted having asked, because the phrase ‘core identity’ has become at times something of a stick to beat me with if I propose any change, even a minor one. ‘You can’t change that; it is part of our core identity.’

Despite that, I do think trying to understand who we are is really important. It will help to focus what we do, so I have persisted with the question in my own mind ever since. What is our core identity?

Initially the answers I received, and indeed my own thoughts, were very much to do with the style of the main morning service. Eucharistic, robed choir, vestments, a certain formality. Now, hear this correctly: I am not about to suggest that we change any of that in the near future. Indeed, despite changes elsewhere, that service remains very much as it was when I started, with a few minor tweaks only. But I do now think that as a description of our core identity a focus on the style of one service was and is inadequate. Even if you are one of those who are very attached to this style of service, that description can never be adequate as an identity for the church. It is too small a description. It is a way of worshipping, an elegant and pleasing one, but not who we are as a church. There is a difference.

It is possible also to make the equal but opposite error of adopting too large a description. So we might truthfully say that as Christians gathered into a local church our identity is that of disciples of Jesus Christ. True, but one would have to descend several layers of particularity to give that concrete meaning and turn it into action.

So who are, and what are we here for?

Events this year, including some disagreements, have been very helpful in focusing my mind on this issue. I believe that we are – and what we have to be – is a church for the whole community. In parenthesis I would say that by the term ‘the community’ I do not just mean the strict boundaries of the ecclesiastical parish of Stapleford. The sphere of influence of St Andrew’s has much more porous borders than that, even though it is centered on this village.

But with that caveat, we are and must be a church for the whole community.

Now this might seem to be stating the obvious, but the longer I minister with you the more important I think it is to recognize this identity. It is good to recognize that it is easy for churches to lapse into certain habits of style and indeed habits of theology that can tend to exclude. It is important to stress that that process is usually inadvertent and entirely unconscious, so it is not a question of fault. But one can see how over time the development of habits, whether of style or theology, can lead to a church losing touch with many it is supposed to serve. Narrowness of focus - great for those who like a particular way of doing church - can lead to inaccessibility for others. And if a church is too specialist - I am going to say specialist rather than narrow, because I don’t want to embed a pejorative term to describe an unconscious process – if a church is too specialist it becomes inaccessible to many people. It is as if our village corner shop became a specialist cheese shop - a very good thing in itself, but not able to servie the whole community in the way the Spar supermarket does. In a city, with the next church just a five minute stroll away, it does not matter very much if this happens. Indeed, doing one style of church truly excellently can be a good thing if other churches within walking distance do other things equally excellently. Together they might bring the message of Christ accessibly to their whole community.

But we are the only church in a village community. That is a both a privilege and a responsibility. It means that if those in our community who have not yet experienced the love and welcome of Christ are ever going to do so their best chance is through our ministry. And of those 1,700 or so souls in this village, and many more in the immediate surrounds, who at this time do not know Christ, the interest of one might be pricked by a traditional service, another by a very modern service, another by quiet contemplation; these different styles and more all have their place in a church for the whole community. And so do different approaches to theology. One person will need to hear an explanation why the world is often such a grim place and will respond positively to the understanding that humans are fallen creatures offered forgiveness by our Saviour; another may overwhelmingly need, at first at least, to hear a message of love and comfort; these messages, both true, may come from different theological approaches. Others will be attracted by activities, others by music, others by being served in their moment of need. Diversity in all spheres is therefore the key, I think, to living out our identity as a church for the whole community.

We are already on that road. For us as a church fellowship it means consciously pursuing a wide range of worship styles, embracing theological diversity within Church of England limits, and reaching out in a whole variety of different ways. And for us as individuals within such a church it may mean - and this is where we stumble so easily – that there has to be a willingness to compromise. It may mean giving up some of what we personally like to make space and release resources for something else. That is hard. Equally it may mean giving support to some things we do not personally like. That is also hard. All of this is because as Christians we earnestly desire every person in our community to come to Christ, and because we know for certain sure that different approaches will be attractive to different people. It is all part of being a church for the whole community.

It sounds simple enough, and we are making progress in the diversification and modernization that is needed. But that needs gently to continue, with us now switching our focus to the ways we reach out. The challenges for each of us are likely to be these. Do I want St Andrew’s to be a church for the whole community? And, if so, how am I willing to make that happen?

It will mean different things for different people. But may I tell you the minimum requirement for each of us if we are to live out that identity as a church? It is also, in a way, the only requirement. It is to pray that we should truly be a church for the whole community.

One thing which is obvious to me is that we have, on the whole, already accepted the necessity of the direction of travel towards this goal, grasping instinctively that this is what we need to be. That was very clear from both the consultation on our pattern of services last year and the outreach consultation this. That is a matter for real joy. It shows that we know, deep down, that our first duty is to present the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed accessibly to everyone in our community. We are now doing that in a variety of ways, and we will continue to improve. Being a church for the whole community is, I believe, a God given task, our God given task, and I look forward to continuing to embrace it with you all for many years to come.

Every blessing to you all, Simon