**St Andrew’s Church APCM 2020 – Parish Priest’s report**

In my report to the APCM last year I was able to articulate the simple vision that I had really been groping towards since I started here in late 2015. I said that that we had to be a church for the whole community. Of course, St Andrew’s always has been that in many ways. But I thought then, and still think now, that we needed to express it openly and to pursue it intentionally.

Being a church for the whole community means a number of things. It means our pattern of worship has to embrace variety. We should aim that our pastoral care reaches out beyond our church family, and that there should be intentional reaching out in other ways too. As we re-develop the church building – as in time I am sure we will – we must have in mind the needs of our whole community, not just the worshipping community. You will remember that these were are all things we were working on before Covid struck.

Now, of course, Covid-19 has changed our world. It is not just our ability to socialize that has changed, but so too have the worlds of work, education, healthcare, legal services, travel, shopping and more. So too has church. But nonetheless, the aim still is to be a church for the whole community. What we have needed to think about is how Covid has adjusted what that might look like. The principle has not changed, but we need to look at the practice.

Normally I would start my report at the annual meeting with my take on what has gone on in the previous year. This time round there seems little point in spending too much time doing that. Suffice it to say that 2019 was a good year. Things settled down from the difficult year before. We continued with our project to reach out to the community in an intentional way, and we began to think about the future of our buildings, coming up with a draft set of principles which we then took to both the congregation and community in surveys. The still relatively new ventures of Messy Church and Connect continued to flourish. We had excellent visiting preachers – remember our Science and Christianity series for example. We were very fortunate to welcome Clare Coates, the first curate in this church in living memory, who has been a great colleague and fantastic addition to our team. And John Bryden took over as Director of Music and hit the ground running – remember the choir gloriously opening his first service with Stanford’s setting of Psalm 150. It was a good year. I am grateful to all those who made it so, chief among them, of course, our church wardens Mary Cooper and Alastair MacGregor. Under their guidance 2019 was a harmonious and purposeful year and they deserve our great thanks.

But that briefest of brief summaries is all I want to say about it. It all seems like ancient history now.

2020 started normally enough, well even. We had a double baptism on the first Sunday in January, started a sermon series on the opening chapters of Acts, enjoyed a very special Candlemas festival as Messy Church did All Age Communion and lots more. The year was going with a swing.

And then it all began to fall apart. Concerns about the virus began to keep people away really from late February or early March. In mid-March, earlier than the Church of England as a whole, and before the government would have compelled us to do so, we – that is to say Alastair MacGregor, Mary Cooper, Clare Coates and I – took an emergency decision to shut down our services and activities. I am hugely grateful to all three of them for this decision, as well as for their immense efforts in the months that have followed. It was courageous, and I suspect that decision prevented some illness and saved some lives in our congregation. I say that because we now know that the virus was among us. Another week of gatherings might have been disastrous.

On the very first Sunday of our lockdown, John Bryden and I put together a very crude online service. We got better at it. We learnt to use the abilities of the technology, making as much use as we could of changes of venue and angles, incorporating words and pictures, including lots of recordings of people reading, singing and praying, and so on. An amazing number of people learnt technical skills and took part both in the Sunday services and in St Andrew’s Juniors – my grateful thanks to Clare for leading on that and on Messy Church online. As time progressed we recognized that we had a new congregation. Those viewing our recorded Sunday and Wednesday worship never fell below 100, and often exceeded 200. This was unexpected. It felt like an endorsement of our decision to present the style of services we had chosen.

The content of readings, sermons and prayers were as challenging as they might have been in any setting, but there was a directness and simplicity, with no layers to navigate to get to the message. There was no expectation that newcomers to worship had to learn some new language or get accustomed to ritual or patterns of dress from centuries ago to be able to hear the gospel.

That approach was, I think, in tune with our times. Some might bemoan a lack of willingness to engage, a certain shallowness in society, the demand for instant satisfaction or however it might be characterized. I don’t. We are ministering here and now, and society and people’s expectations are what they are. To my mind it is clearer now than ever before that the word of God, properly read, carefully explained and applied, leading us into prayer, and surrounded with music of praise is a combination used by the Holy Spirit to draw people into the love of God.

Of course one thing we all missed was gathering together, and specifically communion. We debated several times whether to do an online communion service. In the end we did not. Ministers in some other churches made the opposite decision. For my part I had a visceral reaction against the image of a priest taking communion alone. There are too many bad historical overtones.

In any event, in our worship in lockdown we did two things: we used what we had in the technology and its abilities and our people, and we ensured that the message we delivered was in accessible form. And what we did clearly filled a need both for existing members of the congregation and for others. I hope that for many existing members it was a glimpse into a different way of worshipping from what they were used to.

I should also add my thanks to those who were game enough to get on with using the new technology, and to Gwilym Luff who quietly got on with helping lots of our more elderly members. Going forwards, if you, or someone you know, needs help to get online, please let us know. We don’t want anyone left out if there is a second lockdown.

Now, before moving on to where we go from here I want to touch on other aspects of our work in lockdown.

Pastoral care was a priority. Joan King led a marvellous group of volunteers – both our existing pastoral care group and extra members – who phoned everyone on our database. For those who wanted it those phone calls continued on a weekly basis, and there were offers of practical help too. This arrangement was a lifeline for many in a period of uncertainty and seriously restricted social contact. Joan and those who put it into effect are unsung heroes of what we have been doing.

We also offered our pastoral care services more widely, but there was little uptake outside the church family.

As for our youthwork, Zoe Clayton’s first Sunday was the first day of lockdown. I cannot imagine a more difficult situation for a young person to walk into than that, but Zoe was great and rose to the challenge. She straightaway set up some online provision, which after a little while became a Zoom youth group, and that has proved successful. We are now just about to start our first in person groups since lockdown began. Zoe is working 16 hours a week for us alongside doing a law degree which she has just started.

Zoe’s arrival, of course, was because Zac Britton was leaving us to work full time for SSYI. What a great hire Zac was. I am sorry he did not get a proper send off, but he has our sincere and grateful thanks. It is good that we still see him around.

Music has been important during the pandemic. The contribution of John and all our musicians during lockdown was terrific. And since we have come back he and the choir have been working hard and making a wonderful contribution to our services, sounding, I think, better and better. Grateful thanks to them all, and we very much look forward to the return of those who have had to stay away so far, and to great things ahead. One of our ambitions is to get us once again up to the standard at which we will be permitted to do occasional Evensongs at Ely when their choirs are on holiday. There is work to be done, but it is do-able.

Another person who has been very busy for us all in lockdown is Gillian Sanders, our administrator. As well as continuing routine stuff, she fought the good fight with photocopier suppliers – the contract on our existing machine was due to end in August – and with BT and Virgin to try to get wifi installed in the church. What a saga these things were! Suffice to say that she too has our grateful thanks.

Finally before I turn to where we go from here, I want to mention our safeguarding. Lisa MacGregor has been a massive support as our Parish Safeguarding Officer. The workload is immense, and has been increased in some ways during the pandemic because everything is happening in new ways.

The current detailed system is the national church’s way of putting right past mistakes. The need for a massive cultural change in this area in the Church of England has been all too obvious in recent weeks with the report of the Independent Inquiry. Here in St Andrew’s, Lisa has ensured we are doing things correctly, but we are still in need of our own cultural shift. Collectively we need to stop regarding safeguarding as a negative. It makes a very significant positive contribution to the gospel ministry of the church by ensuring that in this area we love others as we love ourselves and are seen to do so. We can make it easier for Lisa by involving her early in our planning, and then knuckling down to do what she says is necessary. It is never actually very difficult. If I may, for once, be bullish, I have no sympathy whatsoever with complaints about our safeguarding requirements, and even if I did, it would not matter, because they are not discretionary.

Now, back to my main theme. Where do we go from here?

As the months went by in lockdown the question that I with others came back to was how things might be different when we were once again able to gather. At the start of lockdown I had naively assumed that in a month or so, maybe six weeks at the outside, we would be able just to get back together and pick up where we had left off. That is what I thought we would do, and you may have too. But as time went on it became apparent that there were going to be restrictions placed upon us that would prevent that, and it also became clear that it would be positively undesirable to do so.

I perhaps need to put those thoughts in context. A large part of the context is the data. Ours, unlike some other data we hear about, is pretty reliable. It is kept in hard copy and Excel spreadsheets, but we have paid the £100 or so needed for the up to date version and are unlikely to run out of rows any time before Jesus returns. Any local historians reading this report in a hundred years to update our church history book will have to puzzle out what the reference to Excel rows is about!

From our data we know that the church has been in decline since the earliest easily accessible data we have, which is from 2006. Average Sunday attendance then, about 170, contrasts with about 90 just before lockdown.

In 2019, there were some good signs. Specifically there was growth in Messy Church, in Messy Church does All Age Communion and in Connect. These newer services put our overall averages up markedly. Other services which were doing ok were our revamped Evensongs, and struggling along but just about holding its own, was our BCP Communion.

But despite huge efforts we did not see growth in our main morning service. The figures go up and down a little from year to year, but overall the main morning service seems to me to be point of continuing numerical decline.

Those of you who used to come to it don’t really need me to tell you that. It was apparent to us all. We sometimes had fewer seated in the congregation than were robed and participating up front. The figures are a little hard to interpret as both counting and recording methods have changed, but it looks to me as though this decline has been continuing, albeit with temporary ups and downs, since the early 1990s at least.

We must take this and its implications on board. Our task has always been to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to as many people as we can. There was lots of good in the way we did our main morning service. It was traditional, orderly worship. But it occupied that main mid Sunday morning slot that is the most likely time for people to come to church. It had the main slot, but it did not seem to speak to the spiritual needs of our village community. That, I think, is the conclusion we have to draw from the relative popularity of some of the other things we do, set against the attendance at that service. It is worth adding that we have done what we can with that service, within the constraints it has, without being able to change the underlying trend. We have tried and failed.

Now all of that is background. The issue is how things should be different going forwards. I know well enough that a least a few do not want to see any change at all. In some ways I stand with you, not least because it would be easier not to change anything. I also accept that there is something good about robes and processions and liturgy. There is something comforting about them. They take us back to a more orderly time, real or imagined. There is time for reflection within the service. And change is both disconcerting and hard work. All these things are true, but for my part I am convinced of both the need for change and for it to happen now.

So what change should we effect? The answer depends to a degree, I think, on what you think the pandemic has taught us. Here is my take on it, in rather short form because this report is too long already.

I think it has taught us that we are capable of great change. That is obvious, but it has also taught us, reminded us perhaps, that change can be for the good. There are lots of aspects of Covid induced change that society will continue with because they are good, and the same will be true in church.

We have learnt too – perhaps we knew it already – that we are capable, individually and as a society of great kindness. This is to be remembered because it is easy to be insensitive in what we say, especially as pandemic-fatigue really sets in. I have been both perpetrator and victim in the last few weeks. I am resolved to remember to be kind, and I hope you are too.

We have been reminded, too, of the need sometimes – I think it is ok to add the ‘sometimes’ - to put others first. None of us complained when Covid patients in that big first wave consumed so much of the resources of the NHS. Other things had to wait. Likewise, putting others first in our planning for the church may mean a prioritization of someone else’s needs.

The last learning point I would highlight is that public truth and transparency really matter. In our church life I am committed to the truth. I will attempt to give straight answers when I have one – the caveat is because the path is not always clear.

So my Covid pandemic learning points in a nutshell: we can deal with change and we know from experience that it can be good; we can continue to be kind in difficult circumstances; it is sometimes necessary to put the needs of others first; and truth matters and will be honoured.

It will be obvious by now that my view is that continuing with our old pattern of services would be a serious error for the church in its mission. I do not think that our main morning service every Sunday should be a communion service, which at its heart has the flavour of a members-only ceremony. It is good for Christians to take communion, and we do and will provide ample opportunities to do so, more as time goes on. But inquirers cannot fully take part. It would not be good if desires to take communion were so inextricably linked to the main mid-morning slot as to impact on the ability of the church to proclaim the gospel to those who have not yet heard it.

Our robes and ritual choreography were, before lockdown, beginning to look very peculiar as the numbers coming to our main service declined. There were on a number of occasions more people doing stuff up front in robes than in the rest of the congregation. That was an odd state of affairs. Current robes and ritual really only came into the Church of England in the late 19th century. They are an even more modern invention in the life of this church. They have an honoured place – that variety thing again - but not in every act of worship. We are trying to attract 21st century pilgrims.

We have changed the time of the main service to 10.30 am. There are a few among us that does not quite suit, and I am sorry for that, but it is a better time for families and for many others. Our services are generally quite a bit shorter than when I arrived, so I hope that is some compensation, and we will gradually make an earlier service a more regular occurrence.

Indeed, a good side effect of the mid-morning change in timing is the ability to make the early service a bit later, moving it from 8 am to 9 am. It will, incidentally, remain robed with the full traditional dignity the service merits. I know that we only had our first of those services last week, but they will become more common as things settle down. That change in timing of the early service is, I think, likely to be beneficial, both to present members as they go on in years – past evidence shows that will be so - and to the missional potential of the service amongst older members of our community.

I have concentrated on our services because that is where change is most obviously felt. But there are other things we need to do. We desperately need a church communications officer – I have been going on about this for years – to ensure that we advertise what we are doing in a timely and appropriate way. We need someone to ensure we use our new methods of fund raising well. We need both creative and technical input for bits of filming that could really enhance our mission. At the moment all these things are a bit ad hoc because I am either doing them or organizing them. And on top of all that we need more support for our home groups, discipleship courses, pastoral care group, new outreach initiatives and more. There are so many opportunities, just so many. The bottom line is that whatever gifts you have could be used for the spread of the gospel. Baking and bible study. Beer and theology. New mums support group. Grave talk. St Andrew’s Saturday cyclists. This pandemic will not last forever. What could you do?

Drawing it all together, there is no doubt that this pandemic has shaken us to the core, and though it will not last forever it is not over yet. But there is an opportunity to be seized, a moment in the spiritual journey of our community which will not be repeated. We will continue to pursue our aim to be a church for the whole community. We will continue to reflect on and learn the lessons of the pandemic. Bring these things together, the opportunity with the aim with the learning, and we can be that church we want to be, one which brings the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed to our whole community.

Every blessing to you all, Simon