**St Andrew’s Church APCM 2021 – Parish Priest’s report**

On the surface, 2020 was a pretty bad year for the church. We actually met on 30 Sundays, but it was so broken up that it felt like fewer. We were virtually unable to socialize. We all know the restrictions we have been under. It was tough, and its not over yet. But I feel that we have been blessed, and it is right therefore, to ask how God blessed us in those tough times. What turned out for the good?

I think the answer is quite a lot. None of it makes up for the misery for each and every bereaved family, or for the financial hardship so many have suffered, or for the stress and loneliness many have suffered. But nonetheless, by God’s grace some good things have come to St Andrew’s during the pandemic.

If we had known in advance what it was going to be like and had been able to plan, I think we might have set our aims quite low. We would have said, I guess, that we wanted to keep people safe and in touch, and to keep the church going. But as a church community we have far exceeded those basic expectations.

Some of the ways in which that is so are obvious. We are now competent and confident about putting videos online, and there are a great many who have worked out the technicalities of contributing. Those will be skills we will use going forwards without a doubt. Our social media output and our understanding of how a church can use social media is now way better than it was. Our pastoral care team found itself able to rise to a huge logistical challenge of keeping in touch with a large number of people. Our choir, singing in a socially distanced way without each member having the support of a neighbour singing right next to them in the stalls has sung better and better. Knowing that there was no scope for congregational singing our music choices have, I think, been freer and more innovative, encompassing a vast range of styles. Our planning and execution of new things in general has become more nimble, moving faster from idea to action. Zoom meetings and groups are now a fixed part of our repertoire, and amidst the obvious downsides there is great benefit in that for many people. I might add that we almost have Wifi, though those of you who have heard me before on the subject, will know it pains me even to consider putting it in the good things category. But it will be a good thing, and it has come out of the pandemic.

These good things came, of course, at a cost. Those among you who have contributed time and effort to keeping the church going know how hard it has been. Every single activity has been more difficult than in normal times. That has been tiring and frustrating, and has increased the workload for those leading the church beyond all recognition. I don’t think that any churchwardens will ever have had to work as hard as Mary and Alastair have this year, with the absolutely constant demands placed upon them. For my part I am hugely grateful to them both, but as Mary is retiring from the role now it is right to record my admiration and respect as well as those thanks. Mary is not just hardworking and multi-talented – we all know that – but she is wise as well. She has a marvellous directness and honesty which she has sometimes had to use to bring me back into line. I have really appreciated the way she has gone about the job and it has been good working together.

Others need to be thanked too. John Bryden has been tireless in keeping the St Andrew’s musical tradition alive in the most difficult of circumstances and the choir have responded brilliantly to his lead. Joan King and then Mary Cooper co-ordinated our pastoral care efforts. Mary and Chris Cooper kept the church clean and the grounds in good condition. Zoe Clayton tried every possible stratagem to keep a vestige of youthwork going. Gillian Sanders was willing and flexible and I could not have managed without her. Chris Bow, Sue Brown, Lisa MacGregor and Clare Kerr have managed our finances impeccably with their various roles. Stephen Brown has kept the necessary work going on our buildings despite all difficulties. Francess Richardson made marvellous new links with neighbours and started a street service which developed into a low key church service. Sophi Berridge has moved our Eco Church project on, again despite all difficulties. And Clare Kerr and Peter Green have fulfilled their various duties as Verger and Sacristan admirably, again, always under restrictions and difficulties. Felicity Cooke and the Messenger team have stepped up to the plate in bringing the Messenger into a new phase of its long life. My sincere thanks to every single one of all of these, and to all of you who have contributed in other ways I have not mentioned. I am truly grateful.

Lisa MacGregor has our grateful thanks in another respect too. As our Parish Safeguarding Officer until a few weeks ago she coped admirably with constantly changing circumstances through the year, and endless new ways of doing things each requiring careful thought and preparation. Lisa, characteristically, wanted no fuss as she came to the end of her time in the role. But I do want to record my gratitude for a difficult job well done, and for the way in which Lisa used all her energies to drag us into adopting modern safe practices. Aside from the nuts and bolts of the role, I think that in 2½ years she has brought about the cultural change that we so sorely needed. That is huge progress. It just now needs embedding. Rob Needle has now taken on the role. Our thanks to him for stepping up.

And if I may give one further special thank you, it is to our curate Clare. How fortunate we have been to have Clare as our curate at this time. Innovative, resourceful, kind and immensely hard working are just some of the right words. Thank you Clare, from us all.

One of the year’s innovations that Clare and Sue Brown came up with was Forest Church. Sue has led our children’s work fantastically over several years now, and the Forest Church innovation has been wonderful. Sue and Clare would be the first to say that in a sense it was forced upon us. Last summer when we opened up we simply could not ask our toddlers and young children to sit still through a service in church where any movement around the building could spread infection. The Johnson Hall was too small to cope with social distancing. And so Forest Church came about. It has been a huge success. It has been, actually, much more of an all age endeavour than Messy Church in the hall ever was. It has been good to see some of our indoors afficionados giving it a try. I am sure there will in time be movement the other way too, which is as it should be. And crucially Forest Church has been a very easy service to invite people to. It is unthreatening, relaxed, fun and inclusive, but when people come they hear the bible read and the good news preached. Holy communion is offered, and they sing and pray. What is not to like?

Of course there are difficulties with having concurrent services indoors and out. We are alive to the fact that at the moment they are very separate events. We need to get our after-service coffee going again as soon as we reasonably can, because that is an obvious point of contact. And to mitigate the separation we will need to have occasional all together services as we did on Easter Day. And when movement and intermingling is permitted we may sometimes have our two separate services join at the end, perhaps for communion together. If we do that, incidentally, it won’t necessarily be movement from outside to inside. We may well ask those inside to go out for communion on occasions. What happens outside is proper church just as much as our inside offering is – I shouldn’t need to say that but it is worth saying I think - so it would be good for us all to enjoy it occasionally.

Amidst these things that we can all see are good I am conscious that I have caused upset, even some anger, by making changes to our pattern of services. I am not the only architect of what has happened, and it is not only my thoughts that have gone into it, but the ideas for the changes came from me and on this issue the buck stops with me. There has been a spectrum of responses. Within that spectrum I do know that it has been really hard for a few, and I am very sorry that has been so.

However, I am not sorry for making the changes. In my annual report last year – still available both in written and video form - I set out my thinking, and I am not going to repeat it all now.

My view – and I know that not everyone shares it - is that in offering only communion services both at its early service and its mid-morning service St Andrew’s was choosing to make the gospel inaccessible in our modern society. Without repeating what I said last year, I would like to develop that a little.

When St Andrew’s adopted that pattern – in the early 1970s I think – it was joining what was known as the Parish Communion movement, a deliberate policy of holding a communion service as the main act of worship every week. Before that the staple diet had been Mattins, what we would categorise as a liturgical but non-eucharistic service, one which had set words and prayers but was not a communion. At that time it would have been the norm in many churches to have an early BCP communion every week, but mid-morning communion only monthly or even less. The BCP stipulates that parishioners should receive communion at least 3 times a year, and inevitably 3 times a year had become the norm in some places. I hasten to say that we are not going back there. In any event, in the 1970s following the Parish Communion movement and changing to a mid-morning communion every week was the course St Andrew’s took. Speak to those who hold the church’s historical memory that far back and they will tell you that there was something of a row about the change at the time.

The Parish Communion movement really took off about that time in many churches, but it had been around since the early 1900s having come out of the catholicizing Oxford movement of the mid 19th century. One of the early slogans of the Parish Communion movement – it was really a campaign group within the Church of England – was ‘ The Lord’s people around the Lord’s table on the Lord’s day’. That’s a neat slogan, but as soon as you state it you can see the movement’s flaw in today’s society. If virtually everyone in a community counts themselves as Christian, then the movement is pretty inclusive. But nowadays that is not the situation, and having the main Sunday service every week as a communion is neither inclusive nor welcoming.

In a way the rot that would expose the movement’s flaw was setting in around the time St Andrew’s and many other churches joined it. To illustrate that with my own experience, as would be the case with many other children growing up in the sixties and seventies our family never went to church except for baptisms, weddings and funerals. My parents had no interest in church, or in seeing me confirmed. Missiologists would refer to my parents as dechurched – they had been brought up in church but had left – and they would refer to me as a child and young adult as unchurched – I had never had a regular experience of church. Many children of the sixties are now grandparents. Our society has a large number of families, I suspect a majority, with three, or at least two, unchurched generations. In that sort of society the aims and the slogan of the Parish Communion movement – ‘the Lord’s people round the Lord’s table on the Lord’s day’ – is a recipe for largely limiting the gospel to those who have already accepted it as true.

We tried with every possible effort to grow our old 9.45 am service for 4½ years since my appointment before the first lockdown, and I am sure my predecessors did too. I have come to the conclusion it cannot be done. The time had come to change and to do so radically. I don’t know if our new services will help to produce growth, but I do know that growth was not possible with the old, so we have to try something new in conjunction with all our other outreach efforts.

So what is our pattern of services going to be?

The first thing to say is that the services will evolve over time – they always have, even within the previous relatively fixed framework. In particular, we won’t really get an idea of how the pattern is working, what the precise content needs to be, and what tweaking is needed until we can meet without restrictions. To give one example, the music at our 10.30 services is rightly now quite performative – that is what we are allowed – but the time will come when we will have to adjust again to full congregational involvement.

Secondly we don’t yet know how the afternoons or evenings will develop. We are planning our first evensong for 6 June, and I would like it to return as a monthly event, robed, traditional and formal, as it was before lockdown, but we do need to go at the pace that John and the choir can manage. Connect, too, is yet to return, but discussions are ongoing. So there is uncertainty over afternoon and evenings.

In the mornings, however, we now have something I expect to be a good working framework.

Each week we will have a 9 am communion service which will be formal and robed. If those things help you worship, the 9 am service may be for you.

This service will use the Book of Common Prayer on all except the third Sunday of the month, when it will be a Common Worship service. Whenever possible, the intention is that the choir should sing at that third Sunday service. If your preference is for a traditional sung communion following our standard Common Worship liturgy, that service is for you. The first of these third Sunday 9 am sung Common Worship communions will be in May. The first likely deviation from the pattern – illustrating how fragile these patterns are in any event – will follow hard on its heels in June. Bishop Stephen is coming to the 10.30 am service that day, and so the choir will be at that service, but we will still have a Common Worship said communion at 9 am. On other weeks the 9 am service will be a quiet, said service. Now that the early service has been moved from 8 am a number of new people are trying it. I hope they will find it to their liking.

As for the 10.30 services indoors, the general pattern will be that the first Sunday will be a Common Worship sung communion, and the others will be Services of the Word. Festivals and holidays will inevitably disrupt the pattern, but that is the basic idea. The Service of the Word is a standard Church of England service, but one with minimal liturgy and great flexibility. The choir will sing at those 10.30 am services save on the third Sunday of the month. On the third Sunday there will be music, but it will be a bit skeletal to start with. It won’t really come into its own until we can have congregational singing. This should become a service at which congregational singing of great hymns and worship songs will be the core, but we will need to be patient to develop that fully.

When there are fifth Sundays we will do different things. In May the fifth Sunday coincides with Trinity Sunday, and it seemed right that we should celebrate that, one of the church’s so-called Principal Feasts and Holy Days, with a sung communion. We will always try to do that with those important days even if it means juggling our pattern a bit.

In any event, whether or not it is a communion service, the 10.30 am service will be less formal than the earlier service, without processions, robes or unnecessary formality. The feel of it will deliberately be different.

And, of course as well as those indoor services we intend to continue with Forest Church, twice a month, on the first and third Sundays at 10.30 am, a communion service and a Messy Church service respectively.

I have already set this out in an email but I know not everyone is able to read them or wants to do so. I hope that this further explanation helps understanding, and perhaps in some instances alleviates fears. I believe there is going to be something for all tastes, or at least as wide a variety as we can reasonably cater for.

As I said, I know not everyone is happy about this. A handful have left, and I am sorry to have lost each and every one of them. Any who want to return will be warmly welcomed back. That actually makes me even more grateful to, and, for what it is worth, impressed by the perseverance of those who I know are equivocal about the changes but are prepared to give them a go. Thank you for your patience. Thank you for being prepared to try something new for the sake of others.

What has been apparent in the discussions we have had is that our different ideas about what services should look like are often related to our different and frankly more important ideas about what a local church is for. Those attending a church, me included, know that church meets some of our own needs. That might be spiritual hunger or a search for truth or suchlike, one of the things that priests like to talk about, but it could equally well be anything as varied as friendship, the alleviation of loneliness or finding peace in a busy life, an opportunity to feel useful, a chance to take responsibility, a chance so serve others or more.

All of those reasons for liking attending church, or liking particular services are fine and valid, but most of them do not really get at what a church is for. They are good by products, not the key purpose. You will have your own thoughts. Some would say that church is primarily a worshipping community, or a place of fellowship, for example. But to my mind, if it is to be narrowed down to one thing from which all else flows, the purpose of the church is to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to as many people as possible and to make them disciples of Christ. That is our Lord’s great commission in a nutshell. All discussions around the pattern and format of our services need, again to my way of thinking, to be considered in that framework. We have asked: how can we genuinely be a church for the whole community? It is the same thing to ask: how can we bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the largest possible number of people?

And that framework does not just apply to services. It also applies to our pastoral care and to all outreach activities. When we return to the topic of refurbishment of our church building, it is that purpose we will need to have in mind. It will apply too, to all the challenges we are going to face over the next year or so, things like reducing our deficit, and how to engage with deanery pastoral planning. Always, the issue is how can we better be a church for the whole community? How can we bring the good news of Jesus Christ to as many people as possible? I should say that in asking these questions and trying to do something about the decline in attendance we are acting in line with what the diocese expects of us, and that is something that may be important when the deanery planning process once again considers which parishes should continue to operate independently and with their own priest.

Having all this in mind, my take on where we are and what the future holds for us is genuinely optimistic. I think we are gradually embedding the idea of being a church for the whole community in our thinking. We know, though we do not often articulate it, that the purpose of the church is to spread the good news of Jesus Christ and to make disciples.

Now I believe the worst of the pandemic is behind us. But even, God forbid, if we are hit with another lockdown, we will weather it. We have weathered the storm so far and come through it safe and intact. We have exceeded any aims we could reasonably have set ourselves. We are tired at this point, all of us, exceptionally and deeply so, but we are not defeated. We have God in Word and Spirit, and we have each other. By God’s grace we have been able to be innovative in the ways we have sought to spread the gospel. We have a wonderful opportunity to do God’s work in this place. There are signs of really good things happening.

My suggestion, my final thought? Pray for the Spirit to act in this place, pray for growth, and hang on for the ride.

Every blessing to you all, Simon