**St Andrew’s Church APCM 2022 – Parish Priest’s report**

This is my seventh annual report for the APCM, and, remarkably, the third during the pandemic. None of us knew, back in March 2020, that the pandemic would still be dribbling on a full two years later. When we first cancelled services and other church events just before Mothering Sunday in March 2020, we did so until, we said, the end of April, though we did presciently say that we might need to extend the period of cancellations. Well, yes, we did need to extend it.

I want to start my report this year slightly left field, by saying this. It is something that we, as a church in a small village, can be very pleased about.

We are now a training parish. That is not an official church designation, but you can, I think, rightly claim to be a congregation which trains people for public ministry. So in the last five years we have had four full time ordinands and two ordinands on summer placement. We have appointed and brought on two occasional preachers. We have had two members become authorised lay ministers. We have trained one curate and will, I hope, shortly embark on training another. That is quite a record, and on behalf of all those who have trained here or are training here, being allowed to make mistakes without recriminations, and to try things out and being helped to learn, I want to say a big thank you to you all. The loving and welcoming attitude you have to all those who train here is a huge contribution.

These thoughts come to mind partly because at some point in the next few months we shall wave goodbye to Clare Coates as she comes to the end of her training – what a fantastic gift she has been to us – but also because the pandemic has, amidst the incredibly hard and debilitating day to day work, given me an opportunity for reflection about where we have come from, what we have achieved, where we are going and what else we need to do.

Over the past six years we have achieved a great deal together apart from becoming a training parish. Some of it is rather dull, but it took a lot of effort from many people, often more effort than you would have thought. So our financial management is now sound, right from the ways in which we collect money to the accounting and reporting. We have brought our governance into line with relevant regulations. So the democratic elements of our church governance work as they should. We have good continuing succession planning for all key posts which works well on the whole. Our safeguarding has been modernised first under the leadership of Lisa MacGregor and now Rob Needle, and it is now excellent. I am grateful to them both. We have a superb database – fantastically useful all the time, but it really came into its own in the pandemic - and a useful modern website. We have excellent professional administrative help from Gillian Sanders. We have a terrific professional youth worker in Zoe Clayton. Our services now include a much wider range of styles than used to be the case, maintaining the traditional but no longer being restricted to just the traditional. Our pastoral care through the JOY group is beginning to reach out into our community more than used to be the case. Our choir has managed to recruit new members, thanks largely to the warmth, energy and musical adventurousness of John Bryden. We have a flourishing ministry to families, thanks largely to the leadership of Sue Brown and Clare Coates and their marvellous team. A new toddler group has been established with stronger links to the church now, led by Clare and our new Licensed Lay Minister Fiona Holliday. It is great to have Fiona on the team and we are very lucky to have her. And although we have lost some members of the congregation for a wide variety of reasons we are now seeing new members of the congregation at all ages. All of these things are significant achievements over the last several years.

One other change that has taken place – this one just in the last year, though we have been working at it for several years – is that the diocese has agreed to cut and has now cut the formal ties between Stapleford and Great Shelford. This is a good thing. It was a bureaucratic arrangement with no real purpose. And it carried with it the threat of absorption of Stapleford into another parish, which the old hands in our congregation have been battling for 25 years or more. That threat has now receded. It means, I think, that the future of Stapleford as an independent parish is a little bit more secure than was the case. It does also mean that in the fulness of time, when the diocesan cogs move, I will become your vicar in the full legal sense.

So, taking a long view we can and should be pretty happy with the way things are going. There is much to be thankful for. There really is. God has been gracious to us.

Having sketched in that big picture I can turn to a report on the last year or so.

I certainly did not think we would still be in pandemic mode now when I reported to you last year. I referred then to the huge cost, in terms of tiredness, frustration and extra workload there had been for all those involved in keeping the church going. Some of that eased over the course of the year as we settled into a kind of longer term pandemic mode, but many of the demands of pandemic church management have remained. And, as was evident at last year’s APCM, not everyone has been happy with the direction the church has taken, so trying to keep the show on the road in a way that keeps everyone at least tolerably happy has been demanding too. Those who lead St Andrew’s – not just me but I think all of us - are coming close to exhaustion caused by the ongoing demands both of charting our way through the pandemic and maintaining some cohesion.

But now we are, I hope, almost out of the pandemic at any rate. Some modest precautions are still in place, but God willing not for much longer. I anticipate – though who can really anticipate anything with this virus – that by the summer our services and events will be a great deal more normal, without masks unless from personal choice, without undue attention to spacing unless that is what someone wants, without obsessive hand hygiene, and without extra ventilation unless summer weather demands it. Not everything will be ‘normal’, of course. I don’t know, for example, when we will feel confident enough to want to share a common cup, but I dare say we will get there too.

Now leaving aside the difficulties I have mentioned, it has actually been a pretty good year, with lots of excellent things happening. It is easy to lose sight of that when the day to day workload is so high. In 2021 we carried on with online services until Easter, and we can be truly proud of a lot of our output. I say ‘we’ and I mean all those who took part, a very large number of you. It was very much a team effort.

Then on Easter Day we broke free. We had our Easter communion outdoors in the churchyard. It was absolutely fantastic, a joyful celebration. I think we will do it outside again this year. One good thing we have learned during the pandemic is how good it can be to worship outside. Other outdoor celebrations included the wonderful Nachingwea Link 40th anniversary celebrations, our Harvest Festival, and various things forced upon us. You may remember, for example, that some of our terrific series of services and sermons on the Living in Love & Faith materials had to be outside whilst we had emergency work done on the ceiling – a passing but grateful thanks to Stephen Brown for his leadership of the Fabric Committee on this and other things - and then both Christingle and our Christmas Day services were moved outside as Omicron did its stuff. We had indoor specials too, including The Children’s Society Partnership service with the CEO Mark Russell preaching – do you remember him calling us as a church community the fifth gospel in Stapleford? - and not one but two sittings of our traditional lessons and carols service, another pandemic innovation that might be worth keeping.

Socially we have been a bit restricted. Church refreshments after services were a rather on and off affair as the pandemic waxed and waned, but we did manage one church social in the vicarage garden in August. That event in the marquee with the various musical contributions was great fun.

Looking back at it all I think we can genuinely say that in our provision of services, and in our pastoral care, and in our outreach more generally, we are well on the way to fulfilling our vision of being a church for the whole community. That is the vision I have been articulating for some years now – to be a church for the whole community. We want to proclaim and live out the gospel in ways that are accessible to everyone.

None of it could have been achieved without a great many hands on deck. I try to thank everyone but am conscious that I don’t always manage. So a big general heartfelt thank you to all of you. You are genuinely appreciated.

I should though, pay special tribute to our wardens. Alastair MacGregor and Jackie Nettleton have served us with great devotion and deserve and have our enormous thanks. Alastair is going to serve another year, and I am looking forward to that. But a particular word about Jackie as she is stepping down. She promised us just the one year and I am very grateful for it, though I heartily and sincerely wish it could have been more. Maybe we will entice her back in the future. Jackie has been hardworking, and a very wise counsellor indeed, so thank you Jackie.

This year we have also expanded the role of the assistant wardens. Romie Ridley and Felicity Cooke have, for example, taken part in our monthly clergy and wardens meetings, and taken on a variety of the many tasks that need doing, and I am very grateful to them.

In any event, that is all how we have got to where we are. Having reviewed where we are, my custom each year is to look to the future, and try, inadequately, to sketch out where we are going.

I don’t need to take as long doing that this year as I sometimes have in the past. Our general course is set. We are a church for the whole community, and I am convinced that actively pursuing that role is the best way of spreading the gospel here. We have set that course and it is gradually being reflected in all that we do.

That is the easy bit.

My sense, though, is that within that broad vision the church is at something of an inflection point. We now know what we are about and where we are going. We have seen the major changes in our pattern of services that I have referred to, but we have also seen a major change in the makeup of the church family for a variety of reasons. Not the least of these is, I think, just a loss of the habit of churchgoing, something we saw in effect at our recent Ash Wednesday service. And as well as the change in the pattern of our services we have seen quite major additions to our activities in all sorts of ways – a monthly prayer meeting, Forest Church, JOY, the new toddler group, a new men’s group and more. We have done all of that to spread the good news of Jesus Christ in Stapleford and beyond. That is our purpose, and the building blocks are in place, and if new things come our way we will be ready for them. It may not be many years, for example, before we see very significant new housing north of Mingle Lane.

In any event, what we now need to do, I sense, is consolidate a little, make sure our foundations are right, strong for what lies ahead. By this I don’t mean to squash any new ventures that anyone is keen to try. If you have something new that fits with our vision I will back it and support you. But for my part what I want us to concentrate on and enhance over the next year or so are the twin pillars of bible study and prayer. These are the essential foundations for a church, but I suspect that they have become a little weaker in our church community than they should be. That is partly my fault. I have, for example, known for a while that our home groups needed support if they were going to flourish, but I just haven’t had time to do anything about it. My excuse, for what it is worth, is that getting the finances and governance right, and sorting out our pattern of services so that it was truly welcoming to the whole community, supporting those in training and so on and so on have just taken up all my time.

In any event, with Fiona taking a lead, we are now going to spend time and energy trying to build up our home groups. We are starting with a bible overview course just begun, and we will continue with other endeavours as the year goes on. It is essential that we are a church in which reading the bible and applying it to our lives is a widespread habit. At the moment I am pretty sure it is not.

And we are going to see what we can do to build up the prayer life of the church. We have started a monthly prayer meeting, as I said. My intention is to start to build in prayer after our services too as a routine part of our provision. We will have some training later in the year on praying for others. And I will try to encourage the use of prayer resources too. We need to become a church which prays more. There is work to do there as well.

A bit of effort spent on these things will, I think, be well worthwhile. Being disciples ourselves, in the sense of continuously learning from the bible and praying more consistently, will support the mission of the church in the longer term. Our mission is to take the good news of Jesus Christ to Stapleford and beyond and to make disciples. We want to fulfil our Lord’s commission in that regard, and to do that we need to ensure that we ourselves continue to be disciples. We need to be soaked in the Word of the Lord, and be prayerful as individuals and as a church community. That is not a retreat from wanting to be a church for the whole community, looking outwards in that sense. Far from it. It will support that aim and help it and us to flourish.

Standing back, I think there are really good things happening here. It has been a tough time over the last few years, but there is a vibrancy about St Andrew’s that should give great encouragement. God has been good to us as we have sought to spread the gospel here. There are always things to do, and I have set out what I think we need to concentrate on next. My suggestion, my final thought? It is the same as last year. Pray for the Spirit to act in this place, pray for growth, and hang on for the ride.

Every blessing to you all, Simon