**St Andrew’s Church APCM 2023 – Parish Priest’s report**

This is my eighth annual report. It feels as though we have barely finished with Christmas and here we are at our APCM. We have been gradually moving our annual meetings to a bit earlier in the year, but even so it has seemed to come round more and more quickly. That, I think, is partly because I am getting old, and partly because it has been a packed year.

We really came out of Covid restrictions properly last Easter, but we had not recovered from the effects of the pandemic on church life at that point, and I don’t think we quite have even now. There are still things coming up where we scratch our heads and try to remember how we used to do it, whilst at the same time wondering if we should do it differently.

We had lots of good things happening in 2022. Let me just rattle a few of them off to remind you.

During the year we had services in every conceivable place. In the chancel – if you haven’t been to our 9 am BCP Communion services in the chancel you should give them a try, for they are an absolute delight - and in the nave, of course, in the churchyard and in the Johnson Hall. And we have had a wide variety of services. Three particular standouts for me. Early in the year we had a healing holy communion. It was good, and we really should repeat it and get it into our schedule. In the middle of the year we celebrated Her Majesty’s 70 years on the throne with a wonderful service in the Marquee during the village weekend. Then in the Autumn we gave thanks for her life of service as it came to an end. We can really rise to these sorts of events, and we do our regular stuff well too, I think.

Towards the end of the year we really began to get to grips with our All Age services, something we have not done well for years, but which we are getting better at. With prayer and work they will become an important, unifying part of our ministry. And we celebrated all the festivals with great gusto, indoors or out as seemed fitting and possible. Easter and Harvest were wonderful outdoor occasions. Christmas was huge fun with something for everyone. Who will forget our walking, talking Christingle this year, or the John Taverner anthem *A Christmas Proclamation* which closed both our carol services and more than made up for England not being in the World Cup Final that day?

In our various sermon series we took on two more chunks of John’s gospel. It has been a real joy working through that bit by bit, and we will return to it. We enjoyed a really good series by Clare Coates looking at the passion icons of Julian of Norwich – and that included both Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and all the Complines in between, so it was a really good way to travel through Lent. After Easter we tackled the opening chapters of Genesis, and later on we had a series of Summer Psalms. We began a series of sermons on Philippians which we have just ended, the first time since I have been here that we have tackled the whole of one of Paul’s letters.

And we did all the other things that we are expected to do, but really love doing. So we baptised the young – including, rather wonderfully, in Forest Church. During the Reformation, as churches broke with Rome, one of the questions was whether these new breakaways were real churches. One of the answers was any group that preached the Word and celebrated the sacraments, baptism and the eucharist, was a properly understood, a church. So there we are, Forest Church celebrates both sacraments and preaches the Word. It is not play time, it is church.

And of course we conducted weddings and we buried the dead. We held prayer meetings. We enjoyed parties. We had wonderful music throughout the year from our choir – huge thanks to them and to John, and to Sarah and James who help out a great deal. We had visiting choirs from Homerton and Clare College, and hosted lots of other concerts. Our youth groups have gathered week on week, marvellously led by Zoe Clayton. In December they gave us a wonderful nativity as part of a fund raising evening, then with your generous help six of them and two leaders when off to Fort Rocky, a Christian weekend run by Youth for Christ.

In short, at St Andrew’s the Lord was worshipped, the Word was preached, the sacraments were celebrated and we had enormous fun for all ages all the while.

During the year we said goodbye to Clare Coates, as we always knew we would have to, but sent her on elsewhere in the knowledge that by the grace of God and by our contribution to her training she will do a great job there. In her place we welcomed a wonderful new curate in Lucinda Howard, who is already very much making her own distinctive mark on the place. We are very fortunate to have her. We welcomed Ben Barton as an ordinand in addition to David Tisdall and they too have both made excellent contributions to our church life.

So in a huge variety of ways it has been a good year. There are lots of people who deserve our thanks for that, and I mean lots. There are many tasks, small and large, that people do week in week out without which the church would not function. And they are often very unsung. I try to say thank you when I see stuff happening, not as a matter of form, but because I am so very grateful to all who do so many tasks. I won’t, and probably couldn’t, name all those who do different things.

But one person I do want to name is Alastair MacGregor. He is a super-efficient warden, and super-kind and encouraging with it. I think he has done a long four-year stint now, for which he has all our grateful thanks. It has not exactly been an easy four years either. Alastair is now embarking on his fifth year, again with our excellent assistant wardens Margaret Hebden and Romie Ridley. Alastair can only do six years as warden, so at some point very soon one or two people need to step into that role.

That is where we are, my very broad brush take on the last year.

Standing back a little, this is the first year for a while when I don’t feel the need to report on any negatives, as I have in previous years. There is a certain joyful bounce about the church for which we should thank God. Long may it last. Those who stuck with it through the changes of the last few years have realised, I think, that there is room within our little village church for the sort of variety of worship that we now have. Indeed there is a need for it if we are to be a church for the whole community. That is not to say that every service is successful, or that every experiment works, or that any pattern is set in stone, of course, but we have moved in the right direction.

It is true that fewer attend our services than before the pandemic. This doesn’t affect all our services. The early service is more or less the same size as it was in 2019, though the attendees have changed in part. That is partly because of deaths or increasing debility amongst those who used to come, but also the change in time has made it an easier service to come to for some. I was always hopeful that it would. Evensong attendance is about one-third up on 2019, though the numbers are still disappointingly small, particularly so as these are services that John and the choir work really hard at and do really well. If you haven’t come along to an Evensong, you should.

The issue, as regards attendance, is with our mid-morning services. We are about 20 to 25% down on pre-pandemic levels. That is a continuation of decline over many years, but with some accentuation. Clearly some of that additional loss is due to people moving to other churches because the new pattern of services was not for them. And there are a significant number who are much frailer than before the pandemic and have stopped coming for that reason. Any of us who have been here a few years would be able to name a good number who have stopped coming in the last three years or so just for that reason. But, those two categories aside, a good deal of the pandemic reduction is due to a decrease in casual attendance, the falloff in those who used to come once or twice a month. We also see that phenomenon on high days and holidays such as Easter Day, Christmas Day and Remembrance Sunday. Lots still come to those services, but churchgoing, even on these special days, is no longer an ingrained habit in the local population and our numbers are still high, but are reduced. We have also seen it, I think, in the reduction in the numbers of requests for church weddings and church funerals. As a church we have been slow to wake up to this change in habit and what it means for the viability of small parish churches like ours. It is a really serious issue.

So if I ever feel gloomy about church it is because of the numbers – but a slightly unhealthy interest in numbers is a perennial problem for church leaders. That said, one of the things I have to report to the central church each year is the number of new members of the congregation, or strictly new members of a defined entity called, in the statistics, the worshipping community. Over the last few years we have been able to welcome 20 or more new regular adult attendees. There have been slightly more leavers, hence the net decrease in numbers, but nonetheless the number of new people, across a very wide age range, who have looked around and then chosen to make St Andrew’s their home church is very encouraging.

So overall, some parts of the numbers notwithstanding, my sense is that we have come out of the other side of the pandemic in pretty good shape. Our numbers are actually reasonable, our worshipping life is vibrant, we reach out into the community effectively in lots of way, we continue to be a training church, the powers that be finally got round to giving Stapleford a vicar back just recently, and our finances are ok. I will have more to say about finances in the next few weeks, but the overall picture of our church life is good.

What then does the future hold for us?

One thing that has just re-emerged onto the PCC agenda is the question of our vision for our buildings. You might remember that in 2019 we began to look at how we use this building, how we could make it more accessible, more flexible for worship and community purposes and so on. We consulted the congregation and then the wider community, and by early 2020 there was a fair degree of consensus about a set of broad aims. The work on that project then halted during the pandemic, but it is now time to think about next steps. I don’t know what will emerge as priorities but I hope it will include access to the building. Those who use walkers, or wheelchairs or pushchairs struggle to get into this building – that is physically through our two sets of narrow double doors, and then into seating once inside. That is not ok. It should be a matter of concern to us, shame even, that more than 25 years after the Disability Discrimination Act we are still not providing easy access to even the main part of our building. And it is not the antiquity of the building that is stopping us. It is because we have not made that a priority. It is going to cost us to put this right, but we should do it.

Whatever that project turns out to include, it is really going to be for the medium term, measured in years, but not, I hope, in decades.

In the meantime our church life is set to go on broadly as it is. Last year I spoke of the need to consolidate after a turbulent couple of years. To my mind, leaving aside initial thinking about our buildings, that is still what we need to do. As I set out last year, this must involve concentrating our efforts on the twin pillars of bible study and prayer, with one addition that I will come to in a minute.

In terms of bible study we held the Bible Course last year, which was well received, and started up Bible Book Club, or BBC. We had hoped that would become an occasional hub meeting for homegroups and that it would attract others who don’t have time for a homegroup but fancy an occasional session looking more closely at the bible. It hasn’t yet quite caught on, but we will keep on with that. I don’t think that we as a church read our bibles as much as we should, and frankly we are not going to see much in the way of revival unless we get back to that habit. Everything we do turns on the Word of God and our individual grappling with it.

On the prayer front over the last few years we have made some progress. So the expectation now is that at all our services, not just at the mid-morning service, intercessory prayer comes from members of the congregation. That does not always work out, and Lucinda and I play our part in filling the rota, but the de-clericalisation is a positive change of emphasis. We have started a monthly prayer meeting – small but valuable. We are doing the prayer course. We have started providing opportunities for individual prayer after services, which is a major change from the habits of the past in St Andrew’s. And, as time permits, we are going to provide some training in prayer, probably on two fronts, firstly in leading intercessions in our services, not just to improve what we do but maybe to give new volunteers confidence to give it a go, and secondly in praying for others in more pastoral settings, something that we could all benefit from. If you care for someone, why would you not want to be equipped to pray for them?

Those are the two strands, bible and prayer, that we have been working on over the last year, and that we will continue to work on this year. And I want us to add more thinking about discipleship. Discipleship is the name given to how we live our lives as Christians in response to what Jesus has done for us. I am not quite sure yet what shape an emphasis on discipleship should take, but that question ‘how is my faith apparent in my life?’ should be one we all ask from time to time. It should be obvious to ourselves and to others that we are Christian, and that being Christian is our motivation in all areas of our life. In addition to that generalised thinking, and finding ways of helping us to make that thinking a reality, part of a discipleship programme may be, for some of us, those formal markers of taking public steps in the Christian life – baptism (and I am not just talking about babies), first communions, and confirmations (and again, I am not just talking about teenagers).

In any event, that is where we are as a church, what the immediate future holds and some taste of what might be coming further down the track. I feel buoyant about the church and I hope you do too. We are now, genuinely, a church for the whole community. There is always more to do, more people who need to hear about and experience the love of Christ, but we do touch a lot of lives in many different ways. I thank each of you for the part you play. Our gathered church community is the lighthouse and powerhouse of our mission to our village community and beyond. That mission is to tell of and show the love of Jesus Christ. As we have learnt from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, rejoice in the Lord!

Every blessing to you all, Simon