

## Rector's Reflection for All Saints' Annual Church Meeting, March 2024

Let me start where I usually finish – with many heartfelt ‘thank yous’ to those who serve in our church community (and, as always, with apologies for only mentioning each person once – some would appear several times!): to Pat and Barny our brilliant churchwardens; to Ian our fantastic treasurer; to our church stewards (many of whom serve in numerous roles) Amanda, Carolyn, Dawn, Gloria, Paul, Wayne and Virginia, with particular mentions to Ayokunnu and Niki both stepping down for the coming year; to Sylvia, Rosie, Jane L, Philip & Birgitte G, Sue & John R, Philip & Joy D, Pauline W, Paul N, Ron, Allen, Pippa, Joan, Jacqueline, Jane & Eleanor C, Margaret E, Nzube, Teju, the Mitro family, John & Lydia, Samantha, Rachel, Beth and all who've faithfully served on Sundays and at other events and services; and to Nick & Sandra, Brian, Sandy, Trisha, Jovi, Cath S, Giles, Dan H, Afolabi, Justin, the Kingston family, Ann H and David M for their practical skills and support.

... and if I've neglected to mention anyone, please accept my profound apologies!

The above list is a wonderful testimony to the number of people who give their time and energy to our community life as a church family. In a season when many churches are bemoaning the loss of their volunteer culture, ours has grown – at least in breadth.

What would your highlight of the last year at church be? Here's a few which might be in your mind:

- A packed church for Easter Sunday
- The special service for the Coronation
- The new step-free access into church
- The continuing presence and popularity of Tuesday Afternoon Tea
- The Christmas Fayre
- The Epiphany party
- The Lent Course
- Bishop Steven's visit last weekend

There might be a highlight which matters uniquely to you; or it might just be the opportunity to meet with God week-by-week in worship. For all these highlights, both large and small, we give thanks.

I wanted to begin in this way, partly because gratitude is vital for our souls and good for our health, too! But also, because a more general assessment of the year is mixed. There have been many things to celebrate, but there are also significant challenges, as a brief revisit of last year's priorities makes clear.

This time last year, our church was growing quickly, and we set ourselves the task of integrating our newcomers more deeply into the life of the church. Although that has been the case for some people, a couple of whom appear on the list of thank yous above for the first time, sadly the growth we witnessed from 2021-2023 has not only stalled, our regular congregation is now ten or so fewer than it was in February last year. Simply put, numerically we're back to where we were before the pandemic. Our congregation receives many visitors – but only a small proportion settle with us. You could say that we have a wide-open front door (good) and also a wide-open back door (not so good)!

Our second priority was to balance new initiatives with strengthening old ones. Our new Children's Church was the most significant of these re-launches last year and we have five great leaders – however, the presence of a well-organised, fortnightly children's church has not been blessed with many children.

It highlights perhaps our greatest challenge presently: we are failing to reach and appeal to families. When you consider that there are more than 2,500 primary age children in our civil parish of Broughton and MK Village, and another 1,500 or so teenagers, this must give us pause for thought. Younger people are not just the future of the church, they must form a core part of our present, too.

Finally, we stressed the importance of being one community where all can be involved. The challenges inherent in the first two priorities above inevitably place strain on this third priority. If people aren't settling, they aren't serving (and maybe the latter is an important element of the former?). Similarly, if our main weekly worship is not appealing to the whole community, do we need to start something different to run alongside it – for example a service aimed specifically at families? I have always believed deeply in offering worship for everyone – but I don't think we can't meekly accept a situation where only 3-5 children (or two families) attend on Sunday, in an area where a third of the population is under 20.

This year, i.e. right now, I sense we are at something of a fork in the road. And the choice that lies before us is tricky, because one way is easy and the other is harder. The easy road would be to stay much as we are, which is perfectly viable in terms of our survival – at least in the medium term. We have a good core community which can sustain weekly worship on a Sunday with 40-50 attending, a few groups and ministries during the week, half a paid minister and the practical organisation required for a smoothly running church. And before I get onto the harder path, let me stress that these are all good things!

The harder path is more uncertain. It starts with hunger (you could say 'a godly discontent') – a hunger for more of God, and for a new vision of who, what and where God wants us to be over the coming few years. It will involve more toil, more blood, sweat and tears – with no guarantee of success. It will absolutely require us to invest more of ourselves in each other – to notice, to help, to become friends. It will need more prayer, firm hope and greater resilience. It's the difference between being a church which enjoys the Lord's blessing and a church which reveals the Lord's glory. It radiates love, joy and vitality, but – because values like hunger and vision are hard won – it comes at a cost.

And here's the rub: I can't make that choice for you – or, you could say, on your behalf. It's not that I don't want to! But the reality of my role being part-time at two different churches, and with a suite of extra responsibilities in a parish of (now) more than 40,000 people, means that I can back you, resource you, encourage you, pray for you, celebrate your successes, weep as you weep and navigate crises when needed; but the sense of who we are, and what we're about, *must* ultimately come from within us, as a whole community – that is, the body of Christ here in this place.

So, it has to be your decision – as many of you as possible! By God's grace, I will continue to pastor you to the best of my ability, according to your choice – but it's over to you...

*With love in Christ, Matt / March 2024*

P.S. We don't have to rush into anything! The process itself will be valuable, not just for us as a community, but for each person. It may be that what we need to do first is work out how to make this kind of decision. It may help to try and see our church from different perspectives. It's natural for us to think of church from 'my' perspective. But what about others in the church? Or your neighbours? Or God? How does God see All Saints? What does he celebrate and what does he long for?

One caveat, though – not to decide is effectively to take the easy fork. But if that is the ultimate outcome, may it be the fruit of a choice, made prayerfully and faithfully before the Lord, and not by default. And may the Lord bless us and keep us, make his face shine upon us, be gracious to us, and grant us peace. Amen.