

Rector's Reflection for All Saints' Annual Church Meeting 20th March 2023

'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown". And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way".'

This famous quote from a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins has been on my mind recently. Partly it's because as a nation we have felt in 'dark times', and not just because we've had several months of the short days of winter. Mostly it's because, in the last few years, the one constant of our lives has been rapid change. The pandemic affected us all deeply in many ways – one of those being the disorientating sense of constant changes to what we could do, where we could go, who we could see. In church, more or less every week we had to work out if we could do things as a group of 2, 6, 15, 30 or some other number; we changed how we gathered, how we socialised, how we sang, how we shared communion, and more besides. I knew many people – myself included – who for the best part of two years gave up planning anything more than a few days in advance!

So now we stand, like the poet, at the 'gate of the year': more conscious than ever that we can't see too far ahead. And maybe, just maybe, we're a bit more accepting of that than we were. I would never have chosen to learn this lesson the way that we did – and I've only partly learnt it even now – but if I've gained anything from the last two or three years, it's to live more in the present, to understand that phrase of the Lord's Prayer a little better: 'give us *today* our daily bread'. We can rightly understand this as meaning: 'give us everything we need for this day.' In other words, we're not just going to rely on what was left over from yesterday, or worry about what we'll face tomorrow, but *today* we will trust. Today we will walk with the Lord. Today we will use the resources the Lord graciously gives us, for the tasks and people the Lord has in mind for us to be occupied with.

In other words, I find myself in an awkward position as regards writing the sort of 'state of the nation' report expected at an AGM. In this season of learning to trust the Lord in the present, however much the sands may shift around us, how much can – or even should – we plan ahead? Perhaps we should simply summarise according to the lovely words of former UN Secretary General, and strong Christian, Dag Hammerskjold: 'For all that has been, thanks; for all that is to come, yes!'

Nevertheless, I do owe it to you all to update you on the priorities I outlined in last year's reflection, and how we've been getting on with those. There were three, which we'll reprise in no particular order:

First, we noted with joy the many new people who had been joining us, and wanted to help our newcomers get more involved. I'm delighted to report that this has started to happen. We have lots of new people helping: with roles on Sunday, including refreshments, reading, Children's Church; as well as with attending midweek groups and helping at Tuesday Afternoon tea.

We also *continue* to welcome many newcomers, leading to rapid growth at our in-person worship on Sundays. I did some number crunching recently, and our average weekly Sunday attendance in February over the 5-year period 2014-18 was 49. In February 2022 it was 31 (itself significantly higher than 6 months previously as we emerged from the seasons of lockdown etc); in Aug-Dec it was 52. And last month, 1 February 2023 it was 59. So, it has not only almost doubled in a year, we are now noticeably larger than we were before the pandemic – and consistently so: our lowest attendance in February was 51.

The growth may slow a little from this point – but this wonderful flourishing is both a joy and a responsibility. Simply put, there are more of us to journey together, and our church community needs to reflect that! I'll return to that in a moment.

Second, I suggested that we needed to balance 're-starting things' with new initiatives. Again, I'm delighted to see that we have been able to do both over this last year. This month, it has been awesome to see our Children's Church off and running again, with four wonderful new leaders. This was a fundamentally important ministry for our welcome to families, that we absolutely had to re-start – and we have. Alongside this, we have also celebrated the flourishing of Tuesday Afternoon Tea, which has quickly become a staple fixture in our community

life. I'm hugely grateful to Ali Corlett for running with the idea, and to Rachel Morse and the rest of the team for supporting her so well. This began as a response to the cost-of-living crisis but has formed a life of its own, and the team has recently agreed, with the enthusiastic support of those who come, to keep it running – great news!

Thirdly, we wanted to emphasise our life as *one* community: we might continue offering online worship alongside in-person services and events, and we are a wonderfully diverse community: but we have a shared identity in Christ and everyone has a part to play. As I'm fond of saying, we are *All Saints*. This kind of vision is hard to evaluate: but the fact that so many people have connected with us over the last year suggests that we are functioning as this kind of community: a place with a real identity and heart, and also a place where people feel they can belong.

Our current growth only reinforces how important it is to retain a clear sense of being the kind of community which models 'unity in diversity'. We celebrate the fact that we have people of all ages, many cultures and all kinds of church backgrounds worshipping together. When we looked at Jesus' teaching a few weeks ago that his dream for the community of God's people is to be 'a house of prayer for all nations', something in my spirit said 'yes! *that's* what we want to be and to become'. Perhaps yours did, too....

Nevertheless, our plan is, and must be, for sustainable growth. We want to see new things flourishing, which allows everyone to play their part. But we'll go at the pace we can manage, and aim to discern the God things and not just the good things. At our AGM we'll spend a bit of time thinking about becoming a community which grows in three dimensions:

- Deeper – into God
- Closer – with each other
- Further – out into the community and the wider world

I hope and pray that we will each of us aim to grow in all three dimensions – and that we as a church continue to offer ways to do that. May the Lord direct our paths: for to journey with our hand in the hand of God, 'that shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way'.

Finally, and always in hope that I don't neglect anyone (and with apologies for only mentioning each person once – some would appear several times!), my heartfelt thanks to: Pat and Barny our brilliant churchwardens; Ian our fantastic treasurer; to Amanda, Ayokunnu, Carolyn, Dawn, Niki, Gloria, Paul, Wayne and Virginia as our church stewards (and all the many ways they serve); to Sylvia, Rosie, Jane L, Philip & Birgitte G, Sue & John R, Philip & Joy D, Pauline W, Paul N, Ron, Allen, Joan, Jane & Eleanor C, Margaret E, Nzube, the Mitro family, John L, Lydia, Samantha, Rachel, Jacqueline and all who've faithfully served on Sundays and at other events and services; to Nick & Sandra, Brian, Paul T, Sandy, Trisha, Jovi, Cath S, Giles, Dan H, Afolabi, Keith W and David M for their practical skills and support; to the Daley family, the Helds, and those who've contributed to our online worship; and of course, to Alise, who keeps me sane and bails me out more often than most people realise!

One last thank you: to Fr Keith, who made an immense contribution to our church life in the five years up to the pandemic. The turmoil of the last three years made it hard for us to arrange a proper chance to say thank you for all that Keith and Chris have given to our community, and this note is only a partial reparation for that. I know we remain in their prayers, as they do in ours.

MJT, March 2023

All Saints Church, Milton Keynes Village - Churchwardens Report 2022- 2023

Optimism and hope has predominated as we have navigated the year through the highs and lows of national and local life. Especially encouraging is the growth and diversity in church attendance, the support and interest in building on the regular pattern of weekly worship, sharing skills and talents and welcoming new life to the church council and stewards team. The appointment of Barny Daley to share and complement the wide ranging role of Churchwarden with Pat Sawyer is greatly appreciated. This report is a compilation of the maintenance works, main events and a summary of Churchwarden's responsibilities in our thriving church and community, including more detailed updates from Barny on some of the maintenance areas and developments.

On 5th June we were able to celebrate Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee with a special service, giving thanks for 70 years as Sovereign and Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The passing of the second Elizabethan Age came just three months later on 8th September with the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at the age of 96. Immediately the national 'Operation London Bridge' funeral plans were observed. The Diocese had issued much valuable advice and guidance. The flag was lowered and the Church was opened daily for prayer and lighting of candles with a Book of Condolence for tributes. Floral tributes from members of the local community were laid by the Giant Sequoia in the churchyard by the main gate. Rev'd Matt Trendall led a commemorative service for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at All Saints on Sunday 11th September. Following the lying in state of Her Majesty the State Funeral was held at Westminster Abbey on Monday 19th September. The accession of King Charles III last September will be celebrated this year as we look forward to The Coronation of His Majesty on Saturday 6th May.



In recent months managing the most cost effective and efficient use of the heating in church perhaps remains one of our most immediate financial challenges. A careful blend of use of storage heaters and high level radiant heaters to ensure the building is as warm as possible for services and other occasions is the main focus requiring planning and timing combined with weather predictions.

New projects are underway:

- **Step free access through the south porch planned by church architect, tenders submitted and selected, awaiting DAC approval.**
- **Second Garden of Rest, NE corner of churchyard, application approved and now in use, bench to be sited.**
- **Yew tree maintenance on church main access path, application in progress.**
- **Mowing shed roof repairs.**



Early in the year, we identified that the roof of the mower shed was in poor condition. We replaced some of the timber frame supporting the corrugated iron covering and installed additional straps to secure it to the brickwork. The last part of the repair is to renew the flashing to the parapet wall. This will be completed when the weather improves.

Part of the damage to the roof is due to the deteriorating condition of the building. It appears to have been constructed without proper foundations and the south west corner has sunk, causing the brickwork to crack. In some areas, the mortar has failed, leaving the bricks loose and in danger of falling out. We will continue to monitor the movement but the long term solution is to reconstruct the shed completely on proper foundations.

- **Replacement of worn mesh over air-bricks.**



When the underfloor heating system was installed in the Victorian era, large vent bricks were installed at the bottom of the walls around the church. Unlike modern vents, these provide ready access to the underfloor area for vermin. At some time in the past, the vents had been covered with galvanised chicken wire. Over the years this has rusted away and become unsightly and ineffective. We have replaced this with new finer gauge mesh which provides better protection against smaller creatures and is less visually intrusive.

In the summer, we cleaned all of the drains serving the roof downpipes. All were left flowing well with the exception of the one to the West of the main porch, which continues to flood. We have cleaned this as far as we can and are planning a more thorough examination when the work to lower the porch floor starts as this drain will be integral to keeping the porch floor dry.

Other works:

- **Routine maintenance**

External gutter, gully and downpipe clearance completed remedying some problems with water ingress from storms and extreme weather condition.

Maintenance inside and outside the church has continued with the dedicated work of stewards and mowing team to ensure the building and churchyard are in good order. Thanks to Wayne, Paul and Barny for their work with the maintenance of the church building including a team for high level cleaning in August. Brian has effectively continued to coordinate the churchyard mowing rota, we extend thanks to Keith Woodbine for his time with the group and encourage new volunteers to step forward this year please. Thanks also to David Monk for his help with the weekly refuse arrangements of bin collections. Saturday Churchyard working groups in March and September 2022 and additional time from folk on weekdays has focussed on essential clearing of ivy, weeds and overgrown graves ensures the churchyard is an inviting area for rest and reflection. Maintaining a weed free accessible 1.5metre wide church path requires labour intensive attention!

- **During the year, we have started to look at the sound reinforcement system in the church.**

The system is at least 20 years old and was mainly designed to reinforce speech from the service leader and readers. More recently, we have started to use more recorded music both before and after services and sometimes to accompany the congregation when there are no musicians available. Occasional users such as weddings and funerals are more often asking for recorded rather than live music. The system is also used to reinforce the sound of the Clavinova electric piano. The quality of the system is not really fit for these latter purposes. Over the next year, we will review options for improving the sound quality in church, potentially with a plan to replace the system in stages, although it may be necessary to renew it in its entirety. In the meantime, we have a temporary solution of an equaliser to correct the poor frequency response.

In the autumn, we completed some minor maintenance work on the storage heaters, including restoring the heater in the vestry to working order. The heater at the front of the nave on the North side has also been repaired.

- **We are looking at the facilities for the provision of refreshments in church.**

A simple servery at the back of the church providing heating for water, washing up facilities and storage will make the preparation, serving and clearing of refreshments safer, more accessible, simpler and easier to manage. Costings to be further assessed.

- **Introduction of wi-fi and contactless/card reader giving**



Following the pandemic, we have not reintroduced the collection plate. Whilst we do have a plate at the back of church, many fewer people are carrying cash. To enable those who don't carry cash to donate to the work of the church and other charities, we purchased a card reader. The reader, accompanied by a screen, allows donors to select a donation amount and pay by card, phone or smart watch. In the six weeks to December 31st, we collected over £420 for church funds, much of which we would have been unlikely to collect as cash.

The payment terminal relies on having good internet access to update itself and process card transactions. It occasionally shuts down or rejects transactions due to the inconsistent mobile data signal achievable inside the church and a more reliable data connection may be required.

- **Welcoming and supporting**



Welcoming NHS walking groups for refreshments mid-week, 7 times over last year, is enjoyable and rewarding, being valued by residents across the city. A team of volunteers in church supply hot drinks, cake and biscuits to 40-60 walking visitors as they end their exercise session and the donations received are a valuable assistance to church running costs.

Once again our Dorcas group is meeting fortnightly with renewed energy to knit and produce blankets for the Ukrainian appeal and Turkey/Syria Earthquake survivors.



Huge thanks to Sylvia for all her support with welcoming and arranging refreshments before and after services and at other times and co-ordinating Dorcas.

- **Annual health and safety requirements** have been addressed through the year:

Lightning conductor inspection and test completed November 2022, NB annual test date varies to enable testing in varying climatic conditions as seasons affect readings. Annual fire equipment check and portable appliance testing completed February 2023. The 5 year fixed wire electrical inspection certificate January 2020 is valid until 2025.

For reassurance and legislative compliance there is confirmation of the maintenance of the formal areas required recorded in the documents below:

- the terrier – a list of land belonging to the church
- the inventory – a list of all the items belonging to the church
- the log book – a detailed record of all the alterations, additions and repairs carried out in relation to the church, its land and its contents.

These have all been maintained to ensure the day to day functioning of the Church and are available as hard copies in the church.

As the months progress we are greatly encouraged to build on the new life in and around church, to extend our pastoral work and give thanks for the leadership from Matt and our church team in this ever growing parish.