

Rector's Report to St Nicholas Church Stevenage APCM – 23rd April 2017

Apparently there are 191 crew members on a Royal Navy Type 45 Destroyer. Each of them has their own tasks and responsibilities, often with others in a team but sometimes on their own.

And as you've heard me say many times, the local church is like a battleship. And whilst on this particular ship there is always room for those who cannot be as active as others or who are coming along to see whether they want to sign up, for all those who are committed followers of Jesus it's a place of active service in the kingdom of God.

That's why though I might be the captain, if we continue the analogy, I can't do everything alone. And it's wonderful to see what a fantastic crew we have here at St Nicholas. Some of them have upfront roles: Curate, Churchwardens, lay preachers, service leaders, intercessors, Bible readers, home group leaders, children's group leaders and helpers, welcomers, duty wardens, wedding vergers, baptism team members, musicians, communion servers, singers and refreshment providers. You are the public face of the church and without your work the church could not function. But there are many others who work in the background but whose roles are equally as vital: PCC members, particularly the treasurer and secretary, safeguarding officers, pastoral team members, cleaners, maintenance team members, flower arrangers, bell ringers, money bankers, sound engineers, PowerPoint operators, event organisers and website developers. Whatever part you have played in the life of the church this year I want to thank you and let you know that I will be praying that the Lord would continue to use you, to bless you and to strengthen your faith that your service

would be a joy and that the Lord would use your efforts to build his kingdom and bring glory to his holy name.

That's also true for the person doing the one job that no one else can do - and that's being my wife. I would not be able to be anywhere near as effective as I am without Judy by my side as my helpmate and my friend. So thank you sweetheart!

This year is a special year for me personally. I reached the grand old age of 50 and it was wonderful to celebrate with you back in January. And although I said so at the time, let me say again how utterly overwhelmed I was at your generous and kind gift. As well as the wonderful Luton Town shirt, I now have a new waterproof jacket, a new reading chair and a new chair for my desk – both of which are very comfortable. And not only did we enjoy a fantastic break in New Zealand, I also have a three-month sabbatical starting in late July and running through to late October. Please pray that it would be a time of deep refreshment – both physically and spiritually- and that we return reinvigorated for the task ahead and ready to serve God here for as long as he calls us to do so.

Looking back over the past 12 months we have much to give thanks to the Lord for. As well as wonderful events such as the flower festival, Love Stevenage, the Come and Sing Messiah, the Easter Journey, the Easter fun day and of course Philip and Karen's wedding last Monday, we now have an extra home group, we've seen some of our young people confirmed and a number of adults baptised and confirmed after coming to trust in the Lord Jesus as their own Lord and Saviour. Our usual groups have continued as well: Momentum, women at St Nicks, Little Lambs, Snack and Chat and when you put all those things

together we have been a very busy church over the last year. In the midst of that business we've also said goodbye to Barbara Skeet and Annabel Thompson, two long-time servants of the church here, and we rejoice to know that they are now with the Lord they loved and served.

But sometimes busyness can hide what's really going on and it's possible to be very busy but not accomplish very much of any lasting value. You see when it comes to the kingdom of God the only thing that lasts are true disciples of Jesus Christ. One day all my sermons will be forgotten, all our programmes will come to an end, and all our memories of events, however good they have been, will finally fade away: what will last are people who have been brought into the kingdom of God through a personal faith in Jesus. Those souls will last for all eternity, and that, brothers and sisters, should be our business.

That's one of the reasons why we made the decision to reduce the number of services both at 8am and 4:30pm because while we were busy putting on services, we couldn't honestly point to very much lasting fruit from those labours.

And this theme of seeking to make the most impact with the time and talents and energy we have has also helped shape the approach to our new Mission Action Plan. Many of you were involved in the week of prayer in the autumn and came along to the day away at Grace Community Church where we thought long and hard about our church and where the Lord might be calling us. Out of that has come a greater desire to make what we do count, to put our time and money and resources into making disciples and growing disciples or to put it another way: to equip God's people for lives of witness and works of service.

I was hoping to be able to present our new MAP for the coming 5 years today, but we aren't quite ready to do that yet as the PCC has more work to do. But I can tell you the headlines.

1: More energy towards telling people about Jesus both inside the church and out in our parish

Since Jesus called us to go out and make disciples we want to reach out more to our parish and beyond. This might happen by, for example, making sure our Sunday gatherings are more mission-minded, by going out of our church with the gospel and by increasing staffing (a new curate and a ministry trainee) to allow for a greater evangelistic reach. This might mean taking reloaded out on the road once in a while, including more testimonies in our Sunday services or running more events with a distinctly evangelistic aim both here and elsewhere. There are lots of ideas but we want to be effective in helping more people become Christians.

2: More efforts to encourage and grow disciple-making disciples who are equipped to serve God and his Kingdom

Because we are all called to grow in our faith so we can serve others and pass on the gospel ourselves we want to use the time freed up by cutting some services to invest in training so we are more effective in our daily walk as Christians and in our works of service in church. This might include sessions on getting the most out of daily Bible reading and private prayer. We also want to equip people to read the Bible with another person as a way of encouraging them to grow in their faith and help us all to grow in confidence as we talk about Jesus with our friends and neighbours. We have our Church Weekend at home coming up and we have already booked a venue and speaker for our

weekend away in the autumn of 2018. This can happen in lots of ways but we want to help grow strong, active disciple-making disciples.

3: A renewed effort to make this building more suitable for work and witness in the 21st century

Because we need a base for our activities and because the Lord has given us this wonderful building, we want to make the most of it. As you know we have already engaged an architect to do a feasibility study of our church and grounds and over the lifetime of the MAP we want to see those plans come to fruition. This building is a great resource and we want to make the most of it.

But whilst all these things look good on paper and can be organised and promoted well, change comes one person at a time as people hear the gospel, respond to the gospel and then seek to live out the gospel. Of course neither coming to faith in Jesus nor growing in that faith is a straightforward process: it's a constant battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. What's more it's a battle in which we need to be continually pressing forward. Standing still eventually leaves us going backwards. So being content with where we are really isn't an option.

So my prayer for us as a church over these this coming years is that we might increasingly be a people who are seeking to know more of God and his ways; a people who are enjoying more of his love and peace in our lives, and a people who are being made more like Jesus in our character and who are growing in willingness, boldness and effectiveness in our mission and service. We already need people to serve as helpers in the Sunday School; people to join the church cleaning rota; and we require more welcomers and intercessors. We're also looking to establish a team of people who can work together to plan and run

our afternoon services so they are more effective in reaching both young and old for Jesus. And in a year's time we will need a new church warden as Steve's 6 year stint comes to an end. So who knows what new area of service the Lord will call you to this coming year!

Of course for God to change and equip us we need to be willing to take a good look at ourselves and see the things that are getting in the way of our walk with the Lord, and one by one throw them aside and instead focus our gaze on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

As we look back in 12 months time – wouldn't it be great to know that at least in part that has been true for all of us, and for all those the Lord has added to our number by our witness and his gracious call.