

Rector's Report to St Nicholas Church APCM - September 2020.

With a church that's 900 years old it would be foolish to imagine that there haven't been years in its history that have been more tumultuous and testing than the last 12 months, but I suspect there have. For all the inconvenience of meeting in the school for 9 months, despite the fears and worries and restrictions under Covid 19, those who have been meeting in this place across the centuries will have faced bigger challenges and greater threats than we have in the last year or so. The plague, the black death, the civil war, peasant's revolt and 2 World Wars to name but 6! But like those folks who faced such times, we've come through it- or at least most of the way through it, still standing, and still trusting in the Lord who does not change.

For most of the last 16 months we have been in exile. I want to put on record again our thanks to Leigh Humphreys and her staff at the Leys School for making us so welcome, but it is nice to be home isn't it.

The fact that the work is now virtually complete – a few snags remain – is down in no small measure not just to our excellent architect and contractors but to the tenacity and dedication of our project manager, Anthony Taylor. Without him, the project would be nowhere near finished now, in fact it may well not even have started yet. From the moment Anthony took up that role he has driven the project forward, hustled, chased, scrutinised, doublechecked and worked hours and hours and hours on our behalf to make sure that we not only ended up with the kind of building that we wanted, but that we paid not a penny more for it than we should.

By his side was Sandy, at times a project manager's widow, given the number of hours Anthony put into this project; and other times keeping the books and running the finances for the Hawkes Bequest.

Anthony, Sandy, you have been gifts from the Lord to us at this time. We thank the Lord for you, and we want to thank you for all your hard work and effort. And as a way of showing our gratitude we have a couple of gifts to give you. They come with our love and deep gratitude and our prayers for God's blessing on you both. Thank you so much.

We've already thanked Steve for his 8 ½ years of wonderful service and dedication to the church here, but I want to thank him and Karen for serving so well as churchwardens over this last year. As a PCC we've had to wrestle with practical problems, financial problems, and lately a pandemic. But we have been remarkably united, and I am sure that will be the case with the new PCC that has been elected today. Thank you to all who have served on the PCC this year.

But it's not just those on the PCC who serve, despite my recent pleas for more people to put their shoulders to the wheel in practical ways, the work of this church has always been carried on by a good number of people who serve gladly as welcomers, cleaners, musicians, singers, flower arrangers, refreshment servers, Sunday school teachers and helpers, home groups leaders, readers, intercessors, pastoral visitors, PowerPoint and sound operators, and the like. This year has been particularly testing for Jason, our treasurer, who has not only had to deal with our regular finances but the enormous bills that have come in from time to time skewing all our numbers and projections. Robin has done a great job keeping up-to-date with the gift aid claims, and others have helped with the banking. Thank you to all of you. And with all the changes and challenges, Alison, as our PCC secretary and church admin assistant, has been a fantastic support to me and the church and has earned her corn like never before. Thank you to every one of you. Never think that your contribution is not noticed or valued. It is, by me, by many others in the church, and by the Lord who we serve together.

A word for Judy as well. How part of the worldwide church can think that it's good for ministers not to marry is beyond me. Personally, I don't think I could function anywhere near as effectively on my own, so as well as her own areas of service, her care for and support of me has been a bountiful blessing as always.

Now rightly much of our efforts and energies have gone into the building project, but that is not all we've done. During the 9 months we were in the Leys School we knocked on more doors than we had for years, and the congregation grew as a result. Our outreach on the St Nicholas estate wasn't always straightforward, we realised at Christmas what a draw this building is to the community, but through outdoor events, car washes, and the like, we have continued to try to spread the good news of Jesus. And those efforts must continue and increase in the years to come.

We now have a wonderful building to which we can invite people, and that will be a good draw. But we don't invite people to come and put their trust in a building, but in a person, in Jesus. It's him we must proclaim, boldly, effectively, fearlessly, imaginatively, through whatever means we can find. That's our role, that is our calling. We are to proclaim the gospel and make disciples, teaching them to obey everything Jesus taught us.

Teaching from the Bible in church and in small groups continues to be at the heart of our church. This last year we've finished our studies in Isaiah, we are now working through Matthew's gospel, we've gone over the basics of our faith, we've run Identity courses and Christianity Explored courses.

Our Home Groups have grown, though not as fast as I would hope. I'd love us to get a point where joining a home group is a natural part of settling into this church family. And if you're not in a home group yet, can I encourage you yet again to give it a go. Right now it's dead easy, because you'd be doing it from the comfort of your own house. Come and see me if you want to give it a try.

In the summer 2019 we were involved in Love Stevenage, and last Christmas we took part in Operation Christmas Child. This year we will be stepping up our involvement with that project and becoming a local hub for deliveries. More information about that and gearing up for getting those boxes ready will be coming out in the next week or so.

Within our church family we had our joys: 4 weddings - Bernie and Rachel in Uganda, Benson and Mia here, and Victor and Eunice in Kenya, and Eugene and Benardine in Nigeria.

And 4 births— babies were born to Chris and Mavis, Eunice and Victor, Dorcas and Brett, and Kate and Mark.

We've lost friends too. All of us were shocked by Nigel's sudden death this spring, and we need to continue to love and support Ann and the family, as we do Jo, after the recent death of Dave Matthews. Some of you will remember Dave from Snack and Chat lunches and quiz nights. But whilst Nigel's death was heart-breaking and sad, the manner of his death was heart-warming. His confidence in the gospel, his desire to see Jesus was a challenge and example to all of us.

A number of friends have moved away, Stephen and Anna, George, and Sheila Selves, but we have been joined by new friends and new family members.

Because we **are** a family, the family of God in this place. That means we share our joys and rejoice with each other when things are going well, and we share our sadnesses and struggles, and try to support one another as best we can. I know that there are many in our church family going through tough times now, dealing with family bereavements, loss of jobs and income, struggles with health, illness, old age, and bowed down by the fears and worries of the world. But that's why God calls us into families, so we can care for each other.

Like all families we don't always get everything right. Looking back over the last 6 months or so since lockdown began, I'm sure we could have done things better in terms of caring for one another. Personally, I wish I'd spent more time with people than on projects – but sometimes projects, and this was a big one, need time. I know some people have been hurt that we haven't been in contact as much as we should have. If that's you, can I apologise both for myself and for the church family. We are trying to do our best, but we are far from perfect. So be patient with us, be forgiving, please; and please be active in reaching out to me and to others in the family. Family relationships work both ways. So if you feel left out, don't take a step further backwards, take a step forwards. We can all get better at looking out for and encouraging one another.

So where do we go from here? Well, over the next 6 months or so the PCC will be developing our next Mission Action Plan, a plan focused on making the most of this wonderfully revitalised building.

1: We wanted this building to be a place equipped for worshipping God and growing disciples in the 21st-century and beyond, and it is. We now have a warm bright, flexible building with meeting rooms and resources galore. Now we need to put it to good use.

2: We wanted our building to be a place where community groups could be welcomed in, so we can build bridges and make connections so that we have opportunities to share the gospel with others. We have that building now. We need to make sure that once it's safe to do so, the building is being used in the way we wanted.

3: And we wanted a building that would be a base for mission out in the world. A place to train and plan and prepare, a place to go out from and come home to. The church is now ready- we need to get on with the task.

That's why my prayer over the last few months has been for the Lord to send out workers into his harvest field. Some of those workers are here. Some of them are active right now, others (perhaps you!) are being stirred to action, but the Lord will send us all out in new ways. Other workers have yet to join us. Some may be new disciples of Jesus, eager to pass on their new-found faith. Let's pray for that. Others may be people moving into the area who want to settle into this church and roll up their sleeves and serve. Let's pray for that too.

But it may be that our next financial challenge is to appoint other paid staff to help us. Paying staff is never a reason to sit back and do nothing, but employing people who have the time and energy to dedicate to gospel work is a wonderful spur for others to get involved. Let's pray for that too.

Of course, these days are strange. We not only face a more anti-Christian and secular culture than for many centuries, but we face a society frightened and divided over many issues, not least Covid-19. So we need to get better at ministering to and supporting one another. Over these coming weeks we need to search out those sheep that have wandered from the flock and encourage them to come back, whether that's in person or online. Perhaps you can help with that. And then we need to head out into our parish and town, to go further afield, to reach those who have yet to hear the good news of Jesus.

That's our calling - because we have a God who sends us out in mission. But remember, we also have a God who equips us to go and a God who promises that as the seed of the gospel is sown, then he will reap a harvest of souls for his kingdom and glory.

Let that be our aim over these coming years. And may God bless us richly, and grow his kingdom here.