

Rector's Report to the APCM for St Nicholas Stevenage

Dear Friends,

I'm sorry I can't be with you in person, but after 2 years the covid virus has got me at last. Actually, this is only my 2nd sick Sunday in 11 years, but after the announcement last weekend and the APCM now it's not a great weekend to be off ill. But Judy and I do thank you for your prayers, and would ask you to keep praying, both for our full recovery and that we might make good use of the time we have left here in St Nicholas.

But before I end with a brief look forward, I think we have to acknowledge that, once again, it's been a tough year. Whilst almost everyone is now back attending church, some much loved members of our church family still haven't been to church for over 2 years. Even now with all the Covid restrictions removed, our worship and fellowship is hampered by both fears of infection and the consequences of picking up a virus which, for some people, could be devastating. Others have faced different problems this year with non-Covid illnesses, mental health issues or the loss of loved ones. But throughout this time, the Lord Almighty has been our faithful one, our rock, our shield and protector. Whilst the night has sometimes been dark, and the wind has often been raging, the LORD almighty has never ever let us go.

Excluding our Christmas services where attendance was appallingly low, we've been blessed with reasonable attendances Sunday by Sunday, with more and more people returning to regular worship. We've also had the joy of welcoming some new people into our church family, including Mark and Rhiannon and their children – our 1st Oak Hill placement student ever! I hope there may be many more in the years to come. Over the last 12 months we have gradually reintroduced many of our activities that were paused throughout the pandemic. For example, prayer ministry after our services, men's and women's gatherings and the fabulous Easter fun day – paused for 2 years – which attracted record numbers on Easter Saturday. So despite the effects of pandemic, I'm convinced that we have a solid foundation and a strong core of people willing to serve. That's something to give thanks to God for, and something on which to build.

Spiritually it's been a joy to have around a dozen members of our congregation regularly attend the Discipleship Course, whilst on Sundays we've preached through parts of Matthew's Gospel, the early chapters of Genesis and the Pastoral Epistles. Our Lent course in 2021 looked at the Gentle and Lowly heart of Jesus as we rejoiced at the height, length, breadth and depth of God's great love for us, whilst our Advent series focussed on the character of the King we are waiting for. We also ran 2 hope explored courses, with more to come this year. As I said in my talk today, mission and evangelism must remain a priority for the church, whatever else might be going on!

Before I have a brief look forward, let me say a few 'thank yous'.

I'm so grateful to all those who have served on the PCC this last year. The unity amongst us has also been such an encouraging thing. We've discussed some important issues with grace and gentleness, always seeking to follow the Lord's leading through the scriptures. May this continue!

As always, our church has been well cared for and our services well maintained. There are a huge number of different people involved on Sunday mornings from the welcomers, the AV team, the musicians, bell-ringers, Bible readers, intercessors, our children's team, and those providing refreshments afterwards. Thank you so much to everyone who has worked so hard to the benefit of Christ's body here. We can rejoice that with God's help we managed to keep our services running whenever it was legally possible, and that by God's grace everyone was kept safe. Away from Sundays, our maintenance team and flower arrangers have helped to keep the building

looking beautiful. This not only provides a good welcome but brings glory to the God we serve, and I want to thank everyone involved in those 2 ministries. That includes, of course, all those whose work on the refurbishment project has now been completed. What an achievement! To our project team, finance officers, architects, builders, and subcontractors, we thank God for all your work.

Special thanks are also due to our Wardens, Mike and Karen, who have served so well this year and supported me with their words, actions and prayers. Their workload is about to go up, so can I please ask you to make a point of praying for them each day. Even in a church family committed to serving one another, the responsibility that rests on the shoulders of churchwardens during an interregnum is huge. Please continue to pray for them, support them and encourage them as much as you can.

As for the future, only the LORD knows what that holds. Will the now endemic Covid virus fade over the year? How will the economic and geopolitical climate affect us as a church and community? Will the new housing development finally happen? We don't know. But God does, and his plans are good.

You do know by now that you'll need to appoint a new Rector. That process will begin this coming week with a joint meeting of both PCCs. The aim will be to make sure that both PCCs know how the process works, and to establish various working parties who will start to pull a parish profile and person spec together. The aim is to get as much done as possible before I leave office so that the interregnum is as short as possible. However, the search for a new Rector may not be a short process as most interregnums are around 12 months. But the Lord can do far more than we can hope or imagine, so do pray that the right person might be found quickly, that the evangelism, discipleship and pastoral work of the church might not be hindered.

In the meantime, let me end with 3 ways that everyone can play their part in keeping the church running, strong and growing. None of these are rocket science, but they are all important.

1: Pray! Pray on your own, pray with your prayer partners, praying home groups and pray together online and in-person. Make prayer a priority day after day, week after week after week.

2: Encourage! This will be true when your new rector arrives, but in the meantime, make sure you are encouraging your churchwardens, PCC members, duty wardens, musicians – in fact everyone who serves on the Sunday during the week. And whether you feel the things aren't quite right or what they were, make sure your words are encouraging.

3: Don't sit on the side-lines; get involved. Keep giving financially, materially, and in time and energy. Use the time without a vicar to take more responsibility for your own spiritual growth. Join or re-join a home group. Find a prayer partner. Read the Bible daily. And commit yourselves to come to church week after week after week after week. Make sure that when the next Rector walks through those doors they find you active and growing.

The Lord has been gracious to us over this last year. So let's renew our trust in him, stay rooted in the scriptures, recommit ourselves to serve and pray, and continue with the task in hand to love and serve the LORD with joy, grace, compassion, courage and love. And may the LORD build his church and bring glory to his name.

Rev Dave Brown.
24th April, 2022.