

It is as ever my privilege to be presenting a report to you this year – a year in which we have striven to recover much of our usual life from the disruptions of the pandemic. It would be an exaggeration to say that we have done so, but we have come through two years of repeated blows and setbacks without too much having fallen by the wayside, and in some ways we are doing better than I thought, which isn't a bad state to be in. So we've undergone a decline in numbers, but it hasn't been as severe as it might have been, and against my expectations we are fielding a serving team and refreshments team most of the time, even if there end up being gaps here and there. That's quite something in itself, I think.

We've just celebrated our first proper Easter in the normal order – or what's normal for us! – in three years. In 2020 all churches were shut; in 2021 we opened for worship on Palm Sunday but had no procession, and only a handful of us kept the Vigil on Easter Day, just to make sure it was done. Again, managing to do this, to put down our usual markers of good, thoughtful and uplifting worship rooted in the Catholic tradition of the Church of England, is something to be pleased with in its own right.

A few months ago I did a presentation at the 10am service in which I shared some thoughts about the way ahead. I argued that as a church evangelism was now a matter of survival, not just one of the aspects of our work as a Christian community, and everything we did should be tested along those lines. So we have tried to re-establish activities that contribute either to making contact with people, service to the community, or helping people already in the church in deepening their lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Messy Church, the Toddler Group, Church Club; the hearing aid workshops, Kettle's On!, the Bethany Group and Fairtrade have all been examples of this. Some things, such as the Mens' Breakfast or Monday Club at least in its previous form, seem to have reached a natural conclusion. We've taken the opportunity to review and change the emphasis of some other activities such as the Spring Fair, making a sensible assessment of what we can and can't do with the resources we have. Even when such reorganisations take place, it can be about growth, not retreat, and it's not a bad thing.

And we are trying new things as well. Convinced that it helps for our worship to have some element people can access remotely, I have persevered with celebrating Compline online with a small and faithful group! Sunday Space, as an accessible, non-eucharistic service not aimed at children as such, is bedding down though it needs more work. Forest Church has been delayed but it will happen eventually! The suggestion of upgrading our audiovisual systems seems less important at the moment, if only because we don't have a lot of money available now and must concentrate on other things.

Talking of money, our income has recovered very significantly over the past year and we have managed to pay our Parish Share most of the time without dipping into our reserves. This is a very considerable achievement considering how tough things have been, not just for us but for every voluntary organisation, to say nothing of pressure on household incomes too.

Thanks to our indefatigable churchwardens we are tackling things that have needed dealing with for a long time but really required someone to grasp them and push them forward. I mention particularly sorting out the tangled legal and financial management of our property at no.26 Tudor Road; reviewing and organising our fire safety mechanisms and processes after recommendations from the last Quinquennial Inspection and a report from autumn 2019; and having a big and very satisfying clearout of accumulated rubbish in the loft and vestries and other places, which was itself an aspect of health and safety – making sure our fire exit routes were clear, and so on.

As in most years, we have lost some valued and longstanding members of our church community. We've commended to the Lord Pam Rimmer, Doll Newland, Thelma Hunt, Joyce Grabiec, and only very recently Tony Cooper who remained 'one of us', as his insistence that his funeral should take place here shows. And we have also enjoyed others coming to worship with us notwithstanding the pandemic. On the personnel side that includes Gertrud as Lay Reader who has transferred her license here; and although Tom Constable has been part of the church family for some time he has also begun helping as an occasional preacher much to my benefit and gratitude; and a positive wave of retired clergy, namely Diana Osborn, Brian Prothero, and David Hobden, the last of whom wins the Rector's Gold Star (if there was such a thing) for stepping in to take services when I was shut away with covid in March!

No Rector's Gold Stars, but some thanks are in order, even if, as always, I could thank absolutely everyone. Helen and Geoff, as churchwardens, have run with a whole variety of projects, problems and matters that otherwise would have absorbed more time and mental energy than I could possibly have. Ray, Graeme and Jane set up for services and events and manage the practicalities with devotion and dedication. And today very special thanks go to David, not just because this is the occasion when we receive the annual accounts to which he has dedicated so much effort, but also because he's stepping down from the role as Treasurer. Now in every voluntary organisation I've ever been part of, Treasurer has always been the hardest job to fill and when you get a good one you hang on to them! We've managed to hang on to David for ten years and he has been the image of diligence and care. I am delighted to say that Ashleigh Ryninks, one of our newer members, has agreed to take on this role. You may not know her that well but I dare say you will!

Of course the time of challenge never seems to be over, but I suspect that's even more the case in the years immediately to come. Even as the worst strain of the pandemic, hopefully, moves into the background, society faces huge stresses as people's incomes are pressured. It will not be easy, and though we may not see much of it affect the church directly, its outward waves will wash over the people we interact with to damaging effect. We need to be aware of it and whether we are called to do anything in response. That's as much part of our mission as sharing the Gospel of Jesus: justice is part of the Kingdom. We will build on what we have done to date – working on our connections, plugging away to bring God into the lives of those he loves and yearns to welcome into a better kind of existence. I am not an ideas person, so tell me yours and we'll see what we can do. Friends, every blessing to you as we go forward in confidence that, whatever befalls us, He reigns!