

Rector's Report 2024

It's felt as though 2023-4 has been a year (perhaps *another* year) of dealing with things that have been matters of concern for some time, but we've also thought more about how we move forward and I want to talk about that briefly in a moment too – including looking, perhaps, a long while ahead.

As Ashleigh has reported, we finished 2023 with a significant financial deficit, but this is mainly because we've carried out a series of important works, most notably on the gents' toilets, which turned out to be far more costly and involved than we originally thought. We've had the funds to cover those works, but we don't have sufficient reserves to pay for everything we would like to do, so we have to exercise care about what we agree to. Sharon Gleave our office manager went on extended unpaid leave in August to care for her husband James while he underwent cancer treatment. This was originally for three months, but we suspected that his recovery would take far longer than that and so it proved – he still isn't entirely well now. Sharon's prolonged absence also prompted a re-examination of the office arrangements and I and the churchwardens concluded that there wasn't enough work to justify 10 hours a week and we moved towards making the role redundant, a decision endorsed by the PCC in February. Redundancy can of course be very painful and contested but in fact Sharon not only accepted the case but also seems to have been quite glad to do so. Her employment with the church came to an end at the close of March and I expressed our thanks for her time with us, especially the thoughtful way she has supported the congregation in different ways. For now Geoff and Claire are managing the booking arrangements and in a few months we will be in a position to assess what we may need to do to cover the work in the long term.

The slightly rejigged Midnight Mass and our Christmas services generally were well-attended, and while attendance at Maundy Thursday and Good Friday was somewhat down, the main service on Easter Day was up by about a third to exactly 100 for the first time since 2018. Messy Church continues to thrive thanks to the significant efforts of the team. I'm also very pleased with the way the Passiontide Devotion has developed. This was a suggestion by the choir and is very different from the Passion Sunday or Palm Sunday programmes the Rushcroft Singers used to perform, following instead the pattern of the Carol Service with readings and congregational hymns. Richard Stevens leads the choir and the event proved particularly successful this year. Teaching events such as the Bible Study group and the Slow Mass in Lent have also been well-supported.

We know that an important part of our mission is serving our community. The after-school meals project organised by Sue didn't work out in the end, but there is no shame at all in trying things that turn out not to be feasible: no experience is wasted in the scheme of things. An entirely unanticipated development has been the Single Tracks group for single parents, which came out of a suggestion by Messy Church parents Bea and Tracey. Now they have had their DBS clearance and basic safeguarding training they are managing this small but helpful group with minimal supervision from Shirley. Our other ventures – toddlers, Kettles On, Hearing Aid clinic, Quiet Garden and The Villager, carry on successfully; Natalie Springer has taken a leading role in the Toddler Group and organised the Christmas and Easter extras. Our big community events, the Spring Fair and Village Show, went off very well this past year, and were joined by a new occasion, the first St John's Quiz Night. This was entirely organised by Jane Jopson and Marta Riddle and turned a very gratifying profit as well as filling the church with people.

In consultation with the diocese we drew up a new Development Plan which (among some other things) put an emphasis on grounding our future plans in prayer and seeking God's will rather than

necessarily launching into major initiatives. I found it surprisingly hard to get this going but in the end simply decided that I would set aside usually two periods a month to sit prayerfully with the Blessed Sacrament in the Lady Chapel and lay the church before the Lord, and if anyone wanted to join me they could. Usually someone does! Meanwhile it seemed that there was a desire to meet to pray for the needs of our community, and Gertrud now convenes this group once a month. The concrete results of such prayer are sometimes (usually) difficult to discern, but I have no doubt that the Lord works with what we can offer him. Faith sharing and evangelism, and how we might link together activities such as Toddlers, Messy Church and Church Club to encourage the faith of those who come in a more definite way, continues to be a bit of a knotty problem. It's struck me that initiatives I originally intended as evangelistic – Sunday Space, Compline online and Forest Church – might be better thought of as encouraging our existing congregation to think of their faith in different ways, perhaps opening up greater confidence in talking about it, more as discipleship than outreach, at least at this stage.

Any year, sadly, brings the loss of several people from our fellowship. Since the last APCM that includes David Morley, Peggy Goodman, Bob Hearsom, Ann Lister, and Sharon Lewer who we remembered yesterday.

As well as trying to summarise the past year, I also always try to look forward a bit in these reports. One of our key relationships with our community is our link with Farncombe Infants School. A glance at the people who come to Toddlers and Messy Church shows the overlap with the families whose children are, or will be, Farncombe Infants pupils. When Alan Smith resigned as one of our Foundation Governors the PCC agreed to nominate the existing Chair of Governors, Helen Gregory, as his replacement so she could remain on the Governing Body, having been a Parent Governor up to that point, and continue to play a role in the school's financial and organizational restructuring. We also knew that at some point that would also involve the recruitment of a new Head Teacher. In March Andrea Simonsson announced she would be leaving at the end of the academic year, inaugurating a new partnership with Loseley Fields School. Loseley is of course not a Church school, and it's a great relief to me that Joe Bibby, nominated to be Head of School at Farncombe from the Autumn, is a committed Christian who I do hope will maintain the fruitful relationship we've enjoyed with the school during the 18 years Andrea has been Head.

At the last Deanery Chapter meeting Peter Horwood from the diocese came (as he put it) 'to begin a bottom-up conversation about how we resource parish ministry in ten years' time'. I fear we have already seen what this means for some parishes that have fallen vacant: Milford and Wyke have both been told their full-time incumbents will be replaced by a priest working on a house-for-duty basis, which doesn't strike me as very 'bottom-up' however understandable it might be from a resourcing point of view. Even if I don't have any immediate plans to move on from Farncombe, the church needs to be aware that anything might happen to remove me and it's by no means certain that I would be replaced on a like-for-like basis! In the long term we will have to think how a church community at the traditional, Catholic end of the Church of England might operate when the sacramental ministry focused on an ordained person isn't as available as it is now, and yet still remain faithful to its own identity and calling from God.

As always, I finish with thanks. Just to call attention to a few individuals this year, I want to mention especially our churchwardens. I'm very grateful that Michael has agreed to serve again, at least for the coming year, when he expected that it was a role he and Sharon would do together. And Geoff has dealt with a number of challenging issues over the year, devoting more time, energy and labour than we have a right to expect. It really has been a great act of service. Although he isn't here – perhaps especially as he isn't here! – I want to call attention to Matthew who plays the organ for us twice a month. You may not be aware that he's here practicing two mornings a week and sometimes three before going to work, *in addition* to Saturdays. It's quite a lot in view of the modest organist's fee – *and* he does it *very quietly* so as not to disturb anyone. Finally, it was suggested some while ago

that we could have some way of recognising long or outstanding service to the church – a kind of Rector’s Award – and after a lot of thought I asked John Preston to produce these small keepsakes. In future I will ask the staff team who they should go to, but the first is for someone who has served in their current role perhaps longer than anyone else in our church community and without whom the worship we benefit from, which is after all the main channel through which we talk to God and he to us and by which he shapes our thinking and living, would be much harder work to organise. When this individual is away, as they very occasionally are, all of us in the vestry have an ever-so-slight tremor of anxiety because we know they aren’t there to make it all work. Mr Graeme Pullen, thank you for your ongoing service as Head Server, your devotion and your care.

And yet, as we all know, beyond the individuals we might single out for thanks there is an entire community all of whose members are valued, loved and needed. Thank you to all of you for being the Body of Christ in this time and place, and know that, whatever the future might hold, he reigns, and by his grace and mercy, you reign with him.