

Rector's APCM Address 8/5/22



Last year I reported that 2020 was the strangest year

I have lived through, probably most of us will have lived through.

2021 seemed much the same – as far as I can remember it – since I find it very hard to distinguish or remember what happened when – in life in general and in church life too

So very helpful of David, along with Paul and Sylvia to have summarised some of what happened in the Annual Report.

Losses

People we've known and loved died

Many have become more isolated during Covid restrictions and many continue to be so as their own health and mobility decreased.

Rise in tensions in households because of the isolation, lack of work, led to a worsening of relationships for some with more domestic violence reported

Right and proper that we acknowledge that we as a whole community and as church community – across the land – have experienced quite a traumatic time, and suffered losses of all sorts.

I hope we retain something of the gratitude to the many people in our society who serve us in shops schools industry and healthcare

But it has also been a time of re-evaluation of what is important to people –

A significant number of people found the cutting down of previous commitments to be so refreshing that they have not returned to activities they were once doing

The have found other things to do instead, or are just enjoying doing less.

The downside of this is that almost every church has found their attendance decrease significantly, and even as protective measures have relaxed, not everyone has returned to the patterns of worship they once had - especially so with families

St Matts is no exception.

Our current estimates of the number of people who would come to worship at least monthly, has gone down from around 210 in 2019 to around 150 now.

And while it is somewhat helpful to know that most churches have suffered similar fall off – and especially with families, it's really tough to see, isn't it?

We **will** lose our way as Christian disciples if we don't keep up the habit of meeting together.

Of course, tragic events in Ukraine somehow continued this stress and grief into 2021 – a war that being in Europe makes it feel far closer than any other of the awful conflicts going on across the world – and closer still when we have the privilege of welcoming refugees in our midst.

So shall we hold before God now in a moment of silence our losses and grief

PAUSE to pray

I asked the Lord what to share with you today, and I was reminded of the first disciples standing outside the empty tomb on Easter Day.

They were full of grief.

Their hopes crushed.

They did not know how to go forwards.

And yet, there were a couple of things the angels said to them that I think we need to hear –

In Luke we read: *'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!'*

We belong to the God of resurrection!

With Jesus, there is always hope and new life on the horizon – and we are not destined to stay mourning at the graveside at all that we have lost!

With regard who is now part of the St Matthias family,

God has brought nearly 30 new people to us over the last 2 years or so – some of them completely new to faith – or to a renewed faith - hooray!

Of the many families no longer coming to Sunday services, with Lena and team's passion and energy, many of them are still coming to Messy Church and many new families as well – as you can read in the encouraging booklet that Pere has put together for us

And of those who are no longer able to come because of frailty or illness, I believe over half are still joining the worship online – and even though it is hard to work out numbers of people who join in the whole of the 11am Sunday services, most weeks there are probably over 30 people who do 😊

So, as St Paul writes to the Thessalonians about Christians who have died – we do not grieve as others do without hope.

We have resurrection hope for this life as well as life beyond this one. **There are many other reasons for hope and excitement about the future.**

We're having a go with a new pattern time and shape of the informal services – changing from '930 Zone' to Explore – with some in the afternoons – we don't know whether this will prove fruitful or not – but we have an amazing faithful and imaginative team running these services who are happy to give it a try and see how God uses that - or whether we need to try something else.

That faithful spirit has meant that our finances remain secure and we have been able to employ Laura as youth and outreach worker - so we're really excited about that.

We're also trying a new system of overseeing the different areas of church life with 'Action Groups' – to release more of you into using your God-given gifts and to improve communication across the church.

For that to work well, our church values become more important than ever, which is why you'll find a copy of them to look at with me today...



Generous



Jesus



Growing



Joy

Generous like Jesus

We want to

- Offer a warm welcome to everyone – as Jesus welcomes us

Going Jesus' way

We want to

- Keep Jesus as our model of living.
- Pray and worship regularly together
- Remember that is *together* we're the body of Christ – each has a part to play.

Growing on the Journey

We want to

- open to more of the work of the Holy Spirit
- Plug the importance of belonging to 'life groups'
- Share the Good News of Jesus wherever we can.

...and all this, with **God's joy in our hearts**

We want to

- Delight in Him – as He delights in us

Many of the Action Groups were already in existence but several people have stepped up to taking a lead in their ministry areas, like Maureen and Elaine with pastoral care – and we're delighted about some new ones – for example David Hodson heading up the new Eco Action Group, who have already encouraged the church to sign up for a Green Church Accreditation Scheme to keep us moving forwards.

Preschool numbers are at their highest ever – so thanks to Liz and her team, and Sylvia and the dedicated management committee – with the great outdoor space that has developed – have you had a walk around it?

Relationships with Ilsham and Warberry have always been good, but they are getting even better of late with new head teachers wanting to engage with the church even more than before,

Lena's work with younger years of Ilsham school with Godly Play has gone down really well;

The 'Begin Well' antenatal classes have been really valued, as has the 'Mummy and Me' project.

Many of these ministries have only been possible following the completion of the Wellspring re-ordering – at last signed off in 2021 – (so thank you if you had any part in that, including thanks to the Friends of St. Matthias for their support) the Tuesday Toddlers have now moved into church which makes it much more accessible

And the piazza has given us a space to use for outdoor worship offering a witness to the community - and we look forward to continuing to use the flexible space for mission and worship

Pete and Rachel with Evie and Ella have been a real blessing to us in just being here – but also in the ways the youth led Encounter worship and youth group have developed; and been rightly challenging us to get other outreach activities up and running following the work with the Through faith missions work in September

Hence the wonderful privilege of seeing people grow in faith with two Alpha courses, and the joy of the first Coffee Box Saturday morning recently, alongside some new initiatives just starting to help people struggling with the rising cost of living.

Together we're also in the business of growing leaders and preachers – so great news to have Sharon exploring the call to ordination, and to have her and David Hodson joining the preaching team, and Ruth has nearly completed her training as an ordinand and is about to start her curacy in Paignton in September.

So, lots of good news –

And I hope in hearing about the part you are playing in all of that you will be encouraged and know we are all grateful for your service this year –

But while it is always risky to pick out particular people I do want to thank Ruth – in what has been a difficult year in many ways.

Thank you to the amazing staff team, to Paul and Tessa for their huge investment in the life of the church

To our committed musicians – Tony, the singers and the Bevins clan who serve us every week – but do please pray that we find more musicians –

Thanks due also to Cliff, David and the AV team for their faithful service every Sunday – and so much midweek too - alongside the welcomers and coffee crews

To Pere and as already mentioned, to Sylvia and Paul Stannard for holding so much together, often behind the scenes;

I think this coming year, more than ever perhaps, let's take note of what Matthew records for us from the angels speaking to the grieving disciples at the empty tomb:

"He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee.

To me, that speaks about how Jesus always leads us into new things, offering us new ways to work with him in Kingdom work – as Rowan Williams 'once said: *"It's of course a salutary reminder of the very general principle that mission is never a matter of taking God where he hasn't been before, and introducing him to a lot of kind strangers. In every act of mission, God is there ahead of us."*

And I suspect the God of Easter Surprises will continue to surprise us about what he wants from us, and how we are to shape our church community life. I Hope you, with me, are open to the challenges he invites us to take -

From where we are to where you need us,

Jesus, now lead on.

From the security of what we know.

To the adventure of what you will reveal,

Jesus, now lead on.

To refashion the fabric of this world.

Until it resembles the shape of your kingdom,

Jesus, now lead on.

Because good things have been prepared.

for those who love God,

Jesus, now lead on, Amen!