

Annual Report of the Vicar – St Bartholomew's, Otford, 2021-22



"This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'" (Jeremiah 6:16)

I often use that text from Jeremiah as a focus for prayer and I refer to it at our annual meeting because I think it says a lot to all of us about where we have been and where we might go – personally, as a congregation and as a parish at work and at worship within this community.

If we spend time looking at the annual reports for the past year, which generally give an informative and encouraging picture of our life at St Bart's, I hope we can see just how much we have achieved. It's all too easy to concentrate on the negative, or things we ourselves might not like, yet as we continue to develop our mission plan (Called to Grow) it is clear that we have to be able to offer variety, to be relevant, exciting and interesting to a wide variety of people within our community and beyond, to whom we reach out in God's name.

An annual meeting is a good opportunity to thank all those people who have played their own important parts in our church life during the course of the past year as I feel it is important for everyone to realise how much they are appreciated in whatever they do, separate to these remarks, which are more of a reflection of where we've been and a serious charge for us all to think about for our future. Our congregations – and indeed those more widely involved in our church life - are fine examples of love, kindness, prayer and committed action. So many are practically involved in serving God and others with their time, talents, energy, experience and money, in such a way that should give us great confidence and boldness for the future.

But we shouldn't be complacent: we need people to reflect on their stewardship of time, talents, and resources otherwise a small number becomes overworked and we can't take forward good new ideas we may have, let alone deal with the day to day running of an old listed building with people dedicated to making God known in the present day.

If we took that verse from Jeremiah and applied it to the new calendar year I suppose we could have been both reassured and challenged – perhaps like the words from Minnie Louise Haskins' poem God Knows, quoted so famously by George VI: *And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way." So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.*

If we stood at the crossroads (or the gate of the year) and looked back at 2021 I think we would have every reason to be cautiously pleased. The annual reports sheets provide a mere taster of what went on, but I hope you can see that it was a year of building relationships, trying new things, being imaginative, trying to respond to the needs of our church and wider community, and in its widest sense working together especially as we tried to emerge from the shadow of Coronavirus and uncertainty, issues which still haven't completely gone away.

This is now my second year in the parish and inevitably one looks back to see if hopes from the original parish profile I looked at before coming have been anywhere near fulfilled, and if the clear expectations of "the powers that be" in the diocese have been lived up to.

On paper the parish profile promised much activity in the parish, though in fact a few of the groups and ideas were discontinued during the vacancy and Covid – so there was in some areas very much a clean slate, with some sturdy blocks to use as a foundation for ongoing ministry.

Crucially we have needed to think again seriously about our Called to Grow mission plan – plenty of good ideas, certainly, but its practical aspirations and applications can start to move us forward only if we all take them seriously.

Seeds have been evident – activities that had not necessarily run out of steam, just people to keep them going; and a group of committed people with realistic aims and objectives that needed nurturing.

While acknowledging that it is all too easy to “look busy – Jesus is coming!” which can leave everyone drained and lacking in enthusiasm, I think we have been careful to do the things that either we know we can do, or that we are willing to try out confident in God’s strength and support. This is a particularly important thing to remember when we look ahead: there is no point in trying to do a dozen or more new things at once, when we really need to choose two or three and manage to do them well before looking to other areas.

And no activity must be at the expense of praying together and individually, studying the Scriptures, and meeting together weekly according to God’s commandment for our rest and refreshment through prayer and worship, whatever the style of service and wherever we need to meet.

Our congregation numbers are not bad – though of course could be better, particularly as people still consider their post-Covid church attendance. So many other things take people’s attention away from church on Sundays, which is why we have been trying other activities at other times – our increasingly popular Messy Church, social events, themed services, the study courses and so on. The response to these can only be encouraging. We are certainly starting to find renewed interest in what are known as the occasional offices – such as baptisms, weddings and funerals – and it is good to hear that these people are always impressed by the warm welcome they receive to the extent that so many want to come again and again.

It is well worth pausing to think about the welcome we give to visitors. In my 30 years of ordained ministry and even before that one of my key interests has been in communications and welcome. Welcome doesn’t mean tolerating, it means letting everyone know they are valued whoever they are, whatever their experience or background, wherever they are from and whatever they are looking for in church. We can only say welcome if we are prepared to welcome everybody unreservedly, not allowing any personal prejudices we might have to get in the way.

Communication is important too. It is sad that nobody wanted to carry on the excellent parish magazine, but there are many ways you can find out about things – so it seems odd that so many display a sort of glee in announcing that they “don’t read notices.” That’s fine if you don’t read notices that can be sent electronically or as a paper version every week, which are also displayed in church and available as hard copies to take away, or you don’t read websites or social media or posters or listen to notices given out at church services, but you can’t complain that you don’t know about events – some of which take a lot of time and effort to organise – simply because you have chosen not to read or listen. It is not acceptable to claim, “nobody knew” or “no-one told me.”

As we look at those who visit for whatever reason and perhaps even as we look at our regular congregations, we need to ask the all-important mission question: are we attracting seekers AND helping them to become disciples? Mission isn’t so much about “getting people to come to church” as it is BEING God’s people and sharing Christ’s love both within our walls and beyond the church doors in the hope that people will respond and want to be a part of what we have and share.

We are not alone in facing important questions: even the largest city centre churches which week by week are filled to overflowing consider the same question carefully and prayerfully year on year and the sort of discussions we have about attendance or giving here are echoed throughout our deanery and diocese.

But if we stand at those crossroads and listen to what God is saying to us, I think we can honestly be pleased at our achievements in his name and especially in all that we did in the past year. However, crossroads are there to offer a choice of direction – not to make us stand still and look around us in hopeless bewilderment, or stop and go no further.

The point is, what do we do next? How do we build on our relationships with young people through the likes of Messy Church, All Together services and our children's and young people's activities, especially when schools are just not interested in ministers playing any sort of role in school life or even going in to take assemblies?

How do we respond to all those people who dare to come to our church to see a concert or because it's Christmas or simply because we are open and they need a place for quiet prayer and reflection?

How do we speak to a church filled with baptism or wedding guests once they have left the building?

What do we do following big occasions when we somehow manage to cram significant numbers into the church or church centre or church hall?

We trust God and we never give up, that's how. We pray, pray and pray again and we actively listen to what God is calling us to do. We dare to hope and dream. But we do so understanding that we have a role to play in making God present for the current generation as well as for all those that follow.

We would not be sitting here today had it not been for the likes of Thomas Becket, Robert Tritton, William Lutyens, Christopher Bunch, David Towne and all the other Rectors and Vicars of this parish and church and their people being faithful to their calling and living out the Gospel in their age for the benefit of those who followed.

That doesn't mean we are so narrow-minded as to continue saying, "That's how we've always done it" but we need to have open minds and brave, prayerful hearts as we move forward. And to those who insist that "we've always done it that way" the simple answer is, "No, you haven't."

While many of us will be tired of diocesan schemes and initiatives which involve a lot of hard work yet so often bear little fruit, I think we have to look carefully at any that happen to see what we might actually do actively and realistically.

The diocesan mission imperative to develop mission plans in accordance with the Five Marks of Mission is not another in a long list of ideas that will never get anywhere. It is a vision for growth every single parish needs to consider carefully – indeed every single parish and church is expected to provide evidence of what they are doing, how they are responding, and how they are planning to engage.

Sitting on our hands is not an option. We are all called upon to demonstrate how we are growing our church numerically and spiritually, how we are re-imagining ministry, and how we are contributing to the common good. Here at St Bart's we can certainly subscribe to the diocesan mission vision of Called Together and Called to Grow mission action planning.

We are all being called upon to light a flame which, like that first fire empowered by the Holy Spirit and recorded in the 2nd chapter of Acts, will energise and enlighten us and those around us.

We must never allow ourselves to be sidetracked by the administration or any practical issues that may arise. We must see all of this as an opportunity to be seized. If we do not, then we will already have failed this generation let alone those who will come afterwards.

And if we are worried or uncertain, I remind you of our text, encouraging us to pray for and seek the good way and walk in it. And I also direct you to more of that poem by Minnie Louise Haskins, one verse of which says:

*God knows. His will
Is best. The stretch of years
Which wind ahead, so dim
To our imperfect vision,
Are clear to God. Our fears
Are premature; In Him,
All time hath full provision.*

Once again I urge us to pray for a Spirit of wisdom, of peace, of encouragement and revelation to know God and his plans for us better. It is not just for me to stand, to look and to ask – it is for all of us to seek God's will for us, to take up the call, and to follow.

I offer us this challenge with my thanks, affectionate best wishes, and every blessing always.

Rev'd David