

St. Mary's Baldock

Rector's Annual Report

28th April 2019

It happens every year. I get up on Good Friday and pray 'Oh Lord, I really don't want to stand outside Tesco handing out hot cross buns and leaflets. I'd much rather stay in a nice safe church where I don't have to face up to people who don't share my views.' Every year I drive up there with tables, extension lead and sticky tape. And every year I come away thinking it was a really valuable thing to do. This year we gave out 390 leaflets with details of Easter services in the 5 major churches in the town, 125 hot cross buns, and over 30 children and as many adults stopped to engage with our activities – look at the results on the Easter Garden behind you and Jim and Pat manfully plugged away with seasonal Christian songs. Most of the shoppers seemed pleased to see us. A distinct minority refused to look at us at all! I'm not sure it had any effect on who came to us on Easter Day, but we did at least raise the Christian profile of why there were two bank holidays straddling the weekend of gorgeous weather.

It seems to me that churches can be divided into two types. There are those that affirm the society they are living in and don't challenge the everyday lifestyles and values of the community around them. This means they rejoice with the Easter bunny and don't worry about how many plastic bags they use, but are starting where people are, and possibly appear more relevant to the lives of the people they are trying to reach. Then there are churches who are all too happy to comment upon what they see as destructive elements in society and try to suggest a more creative alternative. This means that they get into trouble at school by suggesting the Easter Bunny isn't real and Tesco on Good Friday is an anathema to them. For many members of the local community they seem out of touch and irrelevant to life. Which category do you think St Mary's falls into? And do you think we have got it right? I'm not sure the answer is completely clear cut but your opinion on many issues outlined in this report will be influenced by your answer to this question.

But on to less philosophical matters. The Church Mission Action Plan which you will be asked to accept during this meeting has four objectives and I want to outline them briefly. The first is *'to make the Syrian family we are resettling as part of the Government's Community Sponsorship scheme, independent within two year by November 2020.'* We have a large group of well over 20 volunteers who are using their gifts well and in many cases, sacrificially, and we are starting to see results. The family appear settled, have many challenges ahead but feel supported. It is extraordinary to think that they have been here for nearly 6 months. It is also very interesting to see the inroads we are making into the community as a result. Their next door neighbour has been to church several times which I am not sure would have happened were it not for this project. And the family themselves enjoy Messy Church and Tiny Tots! I am very impressed with the level of commitment shown by the volunteers who have joined us in this project and would like to express my heartfelt thanks. Whether we will achieve our MAP target by November 2020 depends on what you understand by the word 'independent' but they are highly likely to be well on the way by any definition.

The second MAP objective is *'to apply for HLF funding in the first quarter 2019, and to carry out the work during 2020'*. This is for the Nave and Chancel roof alone and has already slipped by 5 months whilst we were waiting for advice about the new HLF grant structure. It is getting ever more difficult to be successful in Grant applications but we believe we have sound advice from our surveyors, from HLF themselves and from the diocese. We have a strong case to put forward, it just depends whether anyone else is more urgent. Peter Joslin has put in serious amounts of hours and will be putting lots more in the next few months and we all owe a huge round of applause to him. If successful, we hope to carry the work out during 2020 in line with the MAP target. If we are not we may re-hone our bid and try again or we may seek other funding, easier to gain but much smaller in amount, so the overall effort would be much greater.

Moving on, out of sequence, our fourth MAP objective is looking further ahead to future restoration once the building is watertight. This will inform decisions about the future of the pews. You will be aware that there is very little point doing much to the inside of the building until it is watertight, but if the HLF bid is successful it will be within 2 years and we can then get on with the more manageable projects of seating, decoration and sound and data projection. I hope you have all filled a vision questionnaire in, if not, it is not too late, which will help the PCC to discern a vision for the building. Should it be more biased towards tradition or accessibility? Peace and beauty, or comfort? The objective is *'discerning a PCC vision for the building informed by consultation with the congregation and wider community by the APCM 2020. This will inform decisions about the future of the pews.'*

Finally, our third objective is *'Developing worship for all ages especially on the first and second Sundays of the month (All age worship and Messy) by monitoring at least termly the effectiveness of the approach we are taking.'* We need to be aware of the dedicated hard work which Emma and the Messy Church team have put into Messy Church over the last year. Delicious food, sensitively linked and thought out craft activities, a warm welcome and high quality acts of worship coupled with personalised advertising have led to the consolidation and growing strength of Messy Church in the last 12 months. We now regularly attract over 50 people to these services and they have been influential in helping our average weekly Sunday attendance to increase by 25% over the last year. We have used a similar approach with families and children who come to our Communion for All Ages on the Second Sunday and we have gained 4 families regularly and another 5 who come occasionally. They are all at different stages of Christian faith, some clearly committed, some very sceptical, but that is surely all to the good. I am trying hard not to scare them off by visiting them whilst at the same time forming relationships with them. I am trying to understand how to monitor the growth in faith and adherence as well as just the numbers who are coming. This is inevitably a bit soft in approach rather than hard data but so far I am remarkably pleased.

At a recent Standing Committee I summed up our position as follows: Are we growing as a Church? Yes we are. Am I pleased at how things are going? Yes, I am. Are we secure in this growth? No, we are not. I still feel that one false move could bring the whole growth down like a pack of cards. Perhaps this means we have to rely on God rather than ourselves and keep immersing the whole thing in prayer and trust that he knows what he is doing even if we do not! Therefore please keep praying!

There's lots more to say about worship but I'll try and keep it to headlines only. It is wonderful to see the Praise be Band back and playing, and also wonderful to see the increased growth of the choir over the last year or so. Those of you who came to their choral act of devotion, Bach on Palm Sunday had a real treat. I should also mention with real gratitude, Paul Herring, indefatigable and quietly present on the organ. We are also grateful to Tim Morton for covering for Paul at various points during the year.

We've already spoken quite a lot about worship but I would like to highlight three further points, one looking back and the other two forward. One of my abiding memories of Holy Week was on Maundy Thursday when we had just followed the cross into church. Some of our less than perfect boys were sitting on the front row in the chancel, the choir had just finished the evocative Taizé chant and I had said the final words, 'Could you not stay awake and watch with me one hour?' There was complete silence. The boys were entranced; Slowly they got up and lit candles and then sat down again. A couple of minutes later one of them waked slowly to the font at the back of church and stood there for 30 seconds or so, before returning to sit in the chancel again. It was very moving and the closest to the Kingdom of God that I have been for a long time.

Second, and hopefully related, we are starting a new service this evening at 6.45pm which is not very imaginatively called the 'Youth Communion Service', which is at least an accurate description. It is followed by pizza, not that that is at all a bribe. It is an attempt to draw together our rather disparate young people in one place and to try to do something worthwhile for them. Third, we are planning a large Pentecost banner to be displayed half way up the Nave (about 10ft square), suspended from the ropes that hold the glitter ball at Christmas. The aim is that every child at our church schools and who is part of St Mary's Church and as many adults as want to join in will have a hand in its production. It will be up for the school services at church the following week. We will need about 10 adults to help the children make it at school, so if you are available for an afternoon, watch out for the notice in the pew leaflet.

I've waxed lyrical again. So here are a few more headlines. I hope you've seen our new website. Thanks to Alex, Emma and Laura for their guidance and perseverance in getting it up and running. Ecumenically, things are more positive than they have been for some time. We now have four events a year which all the local churches feel able to support. The first one is a BBQ here in aid of the persecuted church worldwide on Saturday 1st June. Do support it if you possibly can. It is important it is a successful event. And there is a new head at the Infant School, starting in September. Claire Gunn is retiring from headship after 7 fulfilling and impressive years. She leaves a happy school on the up and will be a hard act to follow. Her successor is called Verity Edie and taught both James Sawyer's children and my brother's children. If she can manage that she can manage anything!

Overall we seem to be a church that engages with life and to know where we are going. The year has been a good one I feel. We are certainly not without challenges but by developing personal relationships with individuals and striving to build upon them, and by doing our best to be faithful in prayer and worship we seem to be moving in the right direction.

I foresee 2 sharp points we will have to face in the coming years. One is finance. Our level of giving has reduced slightly each year for the last 4 or 5. We increased by over £250 this month this year by new commitments, which sounds good until you discover that we reduced by over £330 per month from people reducing. A large part of this was for understandable reasons; we have a disproportionate number of older people on stewardship and as they enter residential care homes or move to the fullness of the Kingdom of God, it has a knock-on effect for us. However it is a challenge we have been facing and will continue to face for the next few years.

The other 'sharp' point is the level of support we get for organising social and fundraising events. We always get there in the end but a large amount of work is shouldered by a small number of people. It would be really helpful if we were able to discern another couple of organisers to help share the load.

I cannot finish without some really heartfelt thank yous. To Emma and Phil for wise council, hard work and supportive discussion as churchwardens. To Sharon and Katrina for their huge contribution to the worship of the Church. To Chris Page for wrestling away with numbers and making them understandable to the rest of us.. To the PCC for fruitful discussions and decisions and governance over the last 12 months. To you all for carrying out your Christian vocations as best you can with good humour and warm faith. And finally of course to Helen, my wife, for believing in me, laughing at me, and constant unswerving companionable support and love.

And now onto the future together in the grace and love of God.

Andrew Holford
Tuesday in Easter Week 2019