

Rector's address to Deferred 2020 APCM – 13th October 2020

Who would have thought that as we enter the start of the second century of Annual Parochial Church meetings (this is our 101st) we would have experienced what we have experienced this year with the pandemic and that we are having to hold our annual meeting as a video conference.

If we had held this meeting as scheduled in April I would have been reporting on our progress over the year 2019 with a reference to the first quarter of 2020. The information about what we did as a church in 2019 is contained in the PCC's Annual Review paper and in the Annual Report and Accounts which you have had the opportunity to read on the church website.

My address last year looked to the future without of course knowing what the future held. There is a delicious irony in this quotation from my address last year – this is what I said:

“One thing that we will be very conscious of is that at some point in 2020, sooner rather than later I hope, we will not be able to worship in the church for a few months,…”

That was in the hope that the work on spaceforall would have started this year!

Some of the themes that I talked about in 2019's address have been cast in a new light since the pandemic hit us.

One of those themes was our response to poverty and homelessness in our community. At our last APCM the possibility of offering a winter night shelter for homeless people was just that – a possibility. In fact it happened. All Saints was able to offer one night a week during January and February this year and together churches in Wokingham gave shelter and hot meals for 7 nights a week for up to 20 different homeless people men and women. We had lots of volunteers from within our church community to help out. We know that for some of our guests it was not only a relief from the harsh winter temperatures in their local community, but also a turning point in their lives. Since the pandemic came along public money was made available and in an astonishingly quick time homeless people were given accommodation by the authorities so that they would not be left alone on the streets and vulnerable to the virus. This coming winter the churches night shelter will not be run because of the change of circumstance though there is a possible plan emerging to provide hot takeaway meals for some who will struggle to have access to a kitchen.

During the lockdown since April some church -linked groups such as The Link Visiting Scheme the First Days Children's Charity and individuals volunteering, came together as part of the community -wide response to meet the needs of those who were locked down and could not get out for food and medicines. Also, they helped those struggling financially and with loneliness and isolation. I know some of you on this meeting were personally involved in those kinds of initiatives and still are as the economic impact starts to hit home.

Last year I was talking about Christian nurture groups and study courses. We had set out a plan for the 2019-2020 academic year. This went well and followed through into the first part of this year. A Turning to Christ Pilgrim course was held in January and February of this year and saw two adults taking steps to draw closer into the Christian faith and the church. Some courses were then continued on Zoom Sadly the lockdown and the uncertainty held back our planning further courses immediately such as preparation for adult baptism or confirmation for those who had attended the nurture course. But we have plans to run an short Advent bible study course ,on Zoom initially. And I am talking to some people about in-person confirmation preparation.

So much of what we were thinking and planning last year has been challenged by the pandemic – especially of course worship and music in worship. We had over three months of no active worship in church at all. Still we have no full congregational singing, though live singing of some hymns at the Parish Communion service by a small group of of volunteers from the congregation has come

back – thank you to those volunteers and please ask if you would like to get involved yourself – it is entirely informal and open to all- and organ music has returned to that service now that our Director of Music has been able to hand over some of the running of the video technology.

Receiving communion is a very different experience too of course; and attendance at all the services is one half or less what it was before April. Many of you have kindly shown your appreciation for what we had done to maintain online worship during the lockdown. I want to say a huge thank you to Richard Smith who mobilised our singers rapidly to record some of the popular and the Easter hymns so that we could offer some sense of continuity with recorded services though the lockdown. Richard was also deftly redeployed as our video producer for Sunday services during lockdown; who worked to ensure that the different clips of readings and sermons and prayers plus the recorded hymns were all brought together to make a coherent Communion service each week of lockdown and then also has seamlessly enabled the set-up of live streaming of the services being held in church, working with Alun and Clive.

Our care and prayer teams came together, just as lockdown was about to start, to set up a joint coronavirus response, identifying those in our church community who were shielding and those unable to access the online provision of services. We set up a telephone system of contact and support to try and make sure that people maintained contact with the church community as a whole and with one another. Also, members of the bereavement care team linked in with the wider community to offer a listening support for those who were unable to attend the funerals of loved ones because of the restrictions. Our home communion team also linked with a Wokingham-wide effort by all churches to throw an arm of support around our local care homes – and though we have not been able to visit inside the care homes there have been lots of different ways the team has maintained contact and provided tokens of our care for them – from goodie bag deliveries to prayer cards and phone calls. I am very proud of and thankful for the leadership shown by our pastoral care team and our various care groups and everyone who has risen to the challenge of this emergency to reach out and maintain the network of care and support in the parish.

Since I spoke at the last APCM our project to revitalise our church building has changed its name to spaceforall and has come much nearer to the point of delivery, once sufficient funds are raised to make a start on the works. The pandemic caused us to change focus not least because our application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund was put on hold by its suspension of current programmes. So the PCC has had a big rethink.

At first, we realised that the virus could delay the achievement of our spaceforall plans here at All Saints Church. So, early in the lockdown, I shared a message emphasising the need to sustain the vision we have for the church, whilst realising it may take longer to implement.

But now we have thought again – we realised the impact of what has happened, on our communities and on our church.

Instead of stepping back, we decided to step forward and to make spaceforall to be part of the answer to meeting needs in the new situation. Adapting the church building to create a community hub for this area of Wokingham is needed more than ever. In All Saints Church we have a large indoor space which can be made flexible and safe in a world where periods of social distancing and a growing trend to stay local will be with us possibly for many years to come.

The church building can meet the need for a large safe flexible community space in our local community where people can be supported as we learn to adapt to the new challenges we now face both as individuals and as a community.

I believe that will be one of the best ways we can share the compassion of Christ in our own corner of the world

That is why, earlier in the summer, the PCC asked our architects and spaceforall team to work on the details of a fresh approach to our project. These details are now in place. We have the support of our Diocesan Advisory Body and full confidence that final permissions will be granted.

The plan is to phase the project. Phase 1 is about opening the church as a community space as urgently as possible. It will include the essential elements inside the church to create a safe, welcoming and flexible space. The other elements in the full plan, such as a new parish room, will be in a later phase. (That said it is important to note that aspects of the overall vision which do not require immediate commitment to construction works are still going. Developing the knowledge base and the plans to engage the community with the heritage of the church and the biodiversity of the churchyard are going forward with support from volunteers both within and beyond the immediate church community)

I urge us all to strive to see the work started as soon as we can in 2021. So much work has been done by the spaceforall team to bring us to a point of readiness to deliver – the delivery will depend on us raising the funds. In order to sustain momentum, we aim to chunk the works down further in to packages even within Phase 1 - into stand-alone smaller pieces which can be done as funds are realised. The first piece – the new floor and associated necessary works – which will create the flexible space we want is the largest single piece and is not exactly small – but we believe it is achievable to be started in the first half of 2021 if we raise the funds. This is about balancing the vision, the buildability and the fund-raising. We are being advised by our architects and associated professionals on the one hand and by our fund-raising consultants on the other – yet this is our project as a church community and the energy and the resources to make this happen come from us.

Funding is being sought from grants and from the wider community. We are also looking for a significant contribution from ourselves, the members and supporters of the church. Spaceforall is such a significant step, both for our church and our community in Wokingham. It will make a huge difference to the well-being of so many people. It will secure the future of the church building as a vibrant focus and intrinsic part of our town's life for decades to come. We have the opportunity now to step forward and to make a lasting and beneficial contribution to the lives of our present and future neighbours.

Breaking news about spaceforall

- the faculty application will be on the door by Thursday
- the key plans will be on display in the church – they have changed very little since the previous ones
- ALL the plans are available on a [web link](#) which will be published in newsletters and on the church web site.
- If people do not have web access but want to view ALL of them they can ring the Parish office and we will arrange this.

Finally, the Rector's APCM address is a time to say thank you. It goes without saying there have been considerable challenges for the church since the last APCM. I have already mentioned my thankfulness for all those who have helped to sustain our worship and ministry in these strangest of times. I'd like to say some thank yous to those who are now stepping down from formal roles in the church.

Thank you to Julie Holmes whose allotted term on PCC has come to an end.

Thank you to Kevin Wernham who has served 6 years on the PCC and therefore must step down. Kevin I thank you for your involvement particularly as one of the group leaders in our mission action planning process which set the agenda very much for the last 5 years of our church's mission focus in the parish and was the beginning of our vision for spaceforall.

Judith Scott steps down now having come to the end of her term on Deanery Synod and therefore as a PCC member. Judith, you have served over 30 years as a PCC member at All Saints I believe without a break, in various different roles. I met you first when you were a member of the interview panel when I applied for the position of Rector here in 1996 and on appointment I remember well with thankfulness your kindness and attention to our needs as a family as we arrived and settled in. You have served as churchwarden, as PCC Treasurer; as a Deanery Synod representative, as the Lay Chair of Deanery Synod, as a Diocesan Synod representative and also as Lay Chair of the Diocesan Synod – all of which meant you were also a member of our PCC throughout as well as of many other committees and councils at the various levels of church administration. I know that I will be not alone when I express heartfelt thanks to you for your dedication to the well-being of God's church and God's mission in this parish and diocese. There is much patience and perseverance needed to sustain commitment to the mission and vision of God's kingdom though all those many committees and council meetings and you have drawn on your deep wells of those by God's grace. I thank you for your many wise and compassionate insights and contributions to our discussions and plans as a PCC as well as for the many ways in which you have made things happen for the better in the life of our church community here. Thank you and please enjoy the new time and opportunities that you will have without the need to attend PCC and Synod related meetings – with our thanks and blessings.

John Smith also comes to the end of his term on Deanery Synod and therefore as a member of PCC. John has been a member of our PCC more or less continuously for more than two decades – John I think you served on PCC before I arrived and before you spent time working in Germany. You have spent many hours in committee meetings for the church and occupied roles as churchwarden and PCC Treasurer; and latterly have served as Lay Chair of the Deanery Synod. Thank you John for all that you have given of your time and skills to the stewardship of God's gifts to our parish and the wider church in our area in all those various roles .

Geoff Davies has served as a churchwarden since 2015 somewhat beyond the normal term of office. Thank you, Geoff, for extending your term of office – little did you know it would be extended further by the virus. I am happy to note that you are still willing to serve on the Church Council and you are standing as a nominee for that later this evening. As you step down from the warden's role I want to thank you for your work as a churchwarden these last 5 years. You have brought absolute commitment to the responsibilities and you have always had the well-being of the people of this parish and church at heart. Thank you.

I would also like to express my sincere thanks too to the team of ministers who have carried us through these challenging last six months in particular – as each one has had their own aspects of the impact of the virus to contend with – Hannah, Colin and John Boylan. Each one of you has been so encouraging and supportive of this parish through all the changes we have had to make.

I'd like to thank all our staff members during this period. We had to make changes to our complement of paid staff both to adapt to resignations and retirements and to adjust to the new situation. We said goodbye to Carolyn Adams, Monica Martin and Janet Alp in the office. Jane Hodgson (not a family member) has been employed as Parish Administrator and Amanda Lambourne as Cornerstone Administrator. Thank you to Derisley and James in The Cornerstone for sticking with u through its closure..

Thank you also to Judi Arnold who stepped down this year from her role as Cornerstone manager having been leader of the Cornerstone Team for over 5 years.

It is a challenging time not only for us as a church community but for the whole of our society. It is as we support and one another with the kindness and compassion God has for us that we will be able to find our way through and be salt and light to one another and our wider community.