

**Parish of Wokingham All Saints
Annual Parochial Church Meeting 15th June 2021
Rector's Report**

This year's annual meeting is once again deferred because of the pandemic. Our annual review and annual accounts reports are related to the calendar year 2020. For my Rector's report however following on from my report in the October 2020 last annual meeting, I'll report on the events of the last quarter of 2020 and first quarter of 2021 up until Easter of this year and look towards the remainder of 2021.

Shortly after our annual meeting in October 2020 the country was once again required to lockdown and people were urged to stay at home for November. Although not mandatory in the November lockdown we suspended church services along with many other churches on safety grounds and returned to the use of pre-recorded videos during November. Fortunately, once again some of our singers were able to record some seasonal hymns and readings in the church in late October before the lockdown was finalised and we were able to use these throughout November, Advent and Christmas. This included a pre-recorded service for Remembrance Sunday we produced with video material from The Town Mayor and other Churches Together ministers. A period of easing of restrictions followed, with services held in church on three Sundays during December. In this period, we had a well-supported Christingle service with families making Christingles in their own pews socially distanced, and a Nativity Service in church on the Sunday before Christmas. These were the first significant service for families with younger children in person that had been held since the outdoor Family Services held in the summer of 2020.

We prepared for the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services to be held in church using a bookable seat system with some to be live-streamed; but a dramatic increase in Covid-19 cases caused the PCC to decide on 20th December that all the Christmas services needed to be online and the services in church were cancelled. Instead at short notices we instituted 15-minute bookable slots for individuals or families to come into church to visit and pray at the Christmas crib. This proved popular and over 40 slots were booked from the day before Christmas Eve through to lunchtime on Christmas Day. Members of our ministry team and other volunteers were available in church to welcome each family or individual visitor. As they were able to have the church to themselves and indeed often a member of the ministry team to talk briefly to there were some significant pastoral conversations that took place in those days.

So having had the strangest quietest Holy Week and Easter in 2020 we had the quietest Christmas ever from a church perspective. A version of the Crib Service was pre-recorded by Revd Hannah Higginson and me. A pre-recorded Nine Lessons and Carols, using the hymns and readings we had recorded in late October for that purpose, was produced and a service of Parish Communion on Christmas Day.

As the second and largest wave of the pandemic gathered pace and a new 3 month long national lockdown was brought in for the first quarter of 2021, we held no more services in church after 20th December until 28th March and of course also the church bells were silenced. The Sunday morning Parish Communion service was recorded during the week for broadcast on YouTube as had been done in the 2020 lockdowns. I am very grateful for the support of everyone who recorded their readings and intercessions at home for use in these services and my ministry team colleagues who produced pre-recorded sermons and presided at home, and for Richard Smith who put the video clips together and for having organised the pre-recording of the Nine Lessons and Carols music and readings. We also enjoyed seeing on those videos flower arrangements by the Flower Guild in the pre-Lent period of the lockdown; and a regular porch arrangement offered a welcome to those using the church for private prayer during the lockdown. The church remained open each day for private prayer. A rota of volunteer church cleaners organised by Sheila Longley

stepped up to come in on Sundays when Derisley Brittain our employed cleaner was of course off duty. Thank you to those doing this which continues for the time being.

Communion services in church at 8am and 10am were resumed on Palm Sunday 28th March with a live-stream at 10am to YouTube for those taking part at home. The live-streaming team of Alun and Clive, with back-up from Richard Smith, has honed its skills with regular weekly streaming of the Parish Communion taking place since then. However, with Alun being the main operator now of our live-streaming on Sunday mornings this does tie up a churchwarden. My objective is to find others who could join a rota with Alun. At Holy Week and Easter, we were able to hold services in church though without singing except for the Dawn Eucharist where we had a brief opportunity to sing outside in the churchyard. An adapted Good Friday Solemn liturgy was well-supported as was a Good Friday family Service with families doing a craft activity in their own pew, decorating stones which they were able to add to the Easter Garden, back in church this year.

Study courses continued on Zoom with a good number taking part in the Archbishop of Canterbury's national Lent course 2021 about witnessing to our faith. This began with an Ash Wednesday service held on Zoom. It was the first time we had held a live service of worship on Zoom. Although not a Eucharist obviously, it included instructions on how to make your own ash for self-administration of the ash during the service. It was the most well-attended Ash Wednesday service for some years with over 40 parishioners taking part! It is also true in some cases that the combined figure of attendance in church and views on YouTube on Sunday mornings has exceeded the numbers previously we had in church for Parish Communion. However, there is no disguising the fact that with social distancing in church for services and the lack of the opportunity by the congregation to sing in person attendance at worship is very much reduced at parish communion being less than half of its previous pre pandemic numbers. The 8:00 am Holy Communion service has recovered rather better running at about 2/3 of its previous attendance levels and I guess partly because the pandemic version of the service is not hugely different from what the experience of the 8am was previously.

In terms of our worship during the period since October 2020 the largest challenge has been continuing to engage with those families with younger children. Wednesday Mums and Messy Church have not yet been able to meet in person. Wednesday Mums meet on Zoom fortnightly. Numbers attending the sessions are low, but the recording of the clergy talk, and prayers is viewed later in the week using the Wednesday Mums Facebook group. Sue Howard the Wednesday Mums member who is part of our pastoral care team has done brilliant work in keeping the Wednesday Mums in contact. Pam Gilbey has also kept in touch with the Messy Church team and previous regular attendees.

Since the Reverend Hannah Higginson went on maternity leave in January Family Services have been offered as an At Home do-it-yourself session using a weekly email with a short introductory video by me on each week's bible reading, a song video and a craft activity. Thank you to Jane Hodgson, our Parish Administrator, who has been providing the craft activity weekly, drawing on her experiences as a Messy Church team member in her home church. These are emailed to over 100 families though regular engagement is much lower.

We can rejoice that the Christingle service last December and the Good Friday family service in early April were well supported by families. In another effort to make contact with our families we organised during Lent a delivery of flower posies to over 80 mothers in the parish and these were well appreciated. Thank you to the Mothers Union and other volunteers for their help with that.

Contact with older children and young teenagers has been more successful through the Zoom meeting of the youth Xplore group led by Robert Vacher during the last few months. Attendance at these sessions has often been higher than would have been otherwise in person specially during lockdowns when many other weekend activities were not available to the young people.

Congratulations to the youth team for keeping these sessions going which are really important for showing that as a church we have been there for our younger parishioners.

In January along with some other ministers in the town I took part in online video sessions based on virtual visits to our church by all the members of the year 7 of Holt school. This was coordinated by Soulscape, the Wokingham schools outreach charity we support. and facilitated by RE teachers in the school. I have continued to produce a collective worship video almost every week for All Saints Primary school and I was able to provide a video presentation for Floreat Montague Park School on the Holy Week and Easter story which was greatly appreciated.

After the hiatus of the third lockdown, christening services have resumed in the church since last month. Additional service dates have been added to the timetable because the social distancing impact on seating only allows for one family at a time in each service. Baptism information sessions have been resumed although on zoom and I am very thankful to Steve Smith and the christening care team for meeting the challenge the pandemic has presented to us in resuming these services. We have also seen a resumption of weddings since last month.

With the spaceforall project since the beginning of 2021 the focus has been on raising the funds having been granted the faculty; although work with the architects on getting ready to be able to let a contract when the funds are available has also continued. Having engaged the services of fundraising consultants for a period from Autumn 2020 through to just after Christmas 2021 with their help we were able to recruit and train our own team to help approach the congregation to talk about individual donations; and we were also able to send applications to some 50 grant making bodies which had been identified by our fundraisers as suitable to approach for this kind of project. Thank you to those who came forward to be part of the telephone asking team and to Judith Scott for coordinating this team - the phase of actively seeking congregational gifts by direct approach is ending, though there are still some individuals and families we are yet to have a hoped-for conversation with. Congregational giving for the project has now reached a total just shy of £200,000 which represents huge generosity on the part of many individuals and families in the church community. Thank you to all who have given in this way. I know there are others who are hugely supportive of the project and would like to have given or to have given more financially than they are currently able to do, especially considering the impact on some family finances of the pandemic and I'm also very thankful for those who have given lots of time, wisdom, energy and prayerful support.

In terms of grants and gifts from outside bodies such as trusts and foundations we have achieved a level of about £100,000 now. Some of this has already been transferred to our bank account, others represent firm pledges. We have £32,000 in the bank from grant funding, which includes a most welcome £12,000 from the Town Council, with £10,000 specifically for the development of the servery. In total our successful grants now amount to nearly £100,000 as we have a further £60,000 pledged from other grant making bodies, including £25,000 from the Garfield Weston Foundation, £15,000 from Congregational and General Charitable Trust, and £10,000 each from the Diocese and from the Wokingham Society, which is for moving memorials.

Overall, we have collected or been firmly pledged just about 60% of the current estimated cost (£1.1 million) of the first phase of spaceforall all which gives us the open and flexible accessible community space with new floor, new level entrance on the north wall, servery and toilets. I'd like to thank Anne King for leading the spaceforall project team and all the work Anne has done to bring us this far; and to all the spaceforall team members for your consistent support and perseverance.

I would like to encourage us all to get involved if you can in the wider fund-raising effort and I will be writing more about this in the Rector's letter for the July magazine which I know Steve is waiting for!

Since I wrote last the Reverend Hannah Higginson, who went on maternity leave in January, has taken safe delivery of baby Daniel who is now several months old. Crispin Gumbs our ordinand in training has also become very much part of the ministry team and is currently leading a weekly Bible study on zoom. He will begin to be included in the preaching rota in coming months. A new assistant curate Becky Medicott is about to be ordained and will join us on the 4th of July. This is a curate-in-training position funded by the Diocese of Oxford.

In the Parish Office Jane Hodgson and in the Cornerstone Amanda Lambourne who both began working with us last August have very much become part of the team and are working well with us. Though of course the Parish Office has not physically been able to be open very much since last October they have continued working from home and answering queries coming through to them by email. Amanda has recruited a number of new users to The Cornerstone without compromising the opportunity for previous users who are yet to return. I will review re-opening the Parish Office completely in person after 19th July.

Looking ahead to the future there is of course spaceforall. The works once started will necessitate the closure of the church building for some months. In that respect the experience of the pandemic has prepared us well in how to keep in touch with one another and to share in worship, prayer and study in a different way. My expectation is of course that we will use the Cornerstone for in-person services. Our focus should also be a pastoral one in rebuilding a sense of our church community as well as also welcoming new neighbours around us who will be discovering our church and perhaps Christian faith for the first time. I believe our work on spaceforall fund raising can also bring us together once again as a church community and these two efforts can be mutually supportive.

In the nearer term we will also be hearing more from members of the church who are leading our thinking and action on the climate and environmental emergency. Hazel Todd, a PCC member and Lorraine Hodgson have been working with the Diocese of Oxford climate change team following a fascinating specially commissioned course about the climate emergency designed to help move us on as parishes in our thoughts and our actions in particular. We will also be seeing more engagement with our churchyard as a place where biodiversity can be celebrated and nurtured and we continue to look for new members of the churchyard team. In connection with the churchyard, I would like to mention that there will be some tree work taking place in the churchyard in July. These are necessary works caused by disease in the case of one tree and health and safety concerns in the case of others. All of these tree works are conditional upon replacement trees being planted.

In terms of the trusteeship and governance of the parish, I'd like to say thank you to our churchwardens Alun and Clive, our PCC Treasurer Anne, our other Standing and Finance Committee members Jon Helyer and John Burbury and also to all PCC members and other church officers who have served this parish in many very generous and sacrificial ways over the last challenging months. There are many others who have sustained Christ-like mission and ministry in our parish. Thank you to everyone for sharing our gifts and your faith as part of the All Saints community.

I want to acknowledge the difficulty we have in finding new churchwardens. I know there are some who would be willing to offer but circumstances are just not right for them at this time. As a parish we are not alone in facing this situation. Other parishes in our deanery – other large churches – are facing the same issue. Many of you already give a lot of time and energy to specific tasks in the ministry and running of this parish. We are incredibly blessed by the level and amount of lay leadership and ministry which is going on week by week. The consequence of no nominations at present in addition to Alun in the short-term is that Clive Charlton remains in office until his term legally expires in the Autumn. So we have between now and the end of September really to appoint a new churchwarden, ideally two new wardens because as many will know as a parish we

have three churchwarden posts. Whilst churchwardens have certain responsibilities formally attached to the role our Standing Committee as part of the PCC works as a team to steer the running of the church. The more we have on that team the more supportive and enjoyable and the less onerous the roles are. I have discussed this issue with the ministry team also. We propose that in order to address this concern in our church we will set up some no-strings-attached learning or exploration sessions and invite church members to come and find out more about what being a churchwarden really does involve and also what it does not require from you either, and explore about what you might be able to offer as a churchwarden.

Finally, I would also like to express my sincere thanks too to the team of ministers who served the parish so faithfully through the challenging period from Autumn 2020 through to Spring 2021 – Hannah, Colin, Chrispen and John Boylan. Each one of you has been so encouraging and supportive of this parish. Thank you.

Canon David Hodgson, June 2021