

Vicar's Remarks – APCM Sunday 25 October, 2020

There is a lot to communicate with you at this time so this report will be available on the website for you to read through later.

Given the increase in restrictions which South Yorkshire is now facing you may well ask whether we will be suspending all public worship. This decision will be made between the Vicar and the PCC. My own view is that I am thankful that churches can remain open. We are aiming to strike a balance between our presence in the building and our online presence. If we close buildings that choice is taken away from those who are unable to attend worship via Zoom. We are utterly committed to ensuring that if anyone, minister or member of the congregation, chooses to attend worship in church or on the green this will happen within the guidelines laid down by the government, local council and Church of England.

We must not allow any mingling between households either inside or outside the building.

We cannot allow the congregation to sing and all participants in worship must wear appropriate face coverings and follow all other guidelines.

We have been doing this well so far and will continue to learn and develop the best practice but no one will be EXPECTED to attend, for each of us there is a choice.

For as long as it is possible, opening our church building gives an important message to the local community: St Mark's is a sacred space, a church of sanctuary, a place where people can find rest for their journey and support along the way. Throughout the last six months we have continued to play our part within Broomhall and Broomhill, and each of us is engaged with our own networks, all of which is an outward expression of our commitment to our faith. Many of us have struggled but we continue to reach out to one another, we continue to do whatever we can to support one another, near to home and far away – this is our faith and we are in this together.

As the days become shorter and the restrictions placed upon us increase we are determined to find meaningful and visible ways of sharing hope. Each of you will have established your own coping strategies, perhaps over the next few weeks we can find ways to share some of them?

During these dark nights we would encourage you to make space for hope in different ways. Every Thursday evening you are invited to place a light in one of your windows, to shine as a beacon of hope into the darkness. It can be an electric light in a window which will shine out into the darkness offering you a moment of peace and perhaps giving others sign of hope. Tell your neighbours what you are doing and invite them to join in...

Perhaps this way we can all “Shine as a light in the world”

At our APCM we have the chance to celebrate the vibrant activities of the church. You will have seen the link to the Annual Report which came out in April. Since then we have had to find very different ways to be church.

Some of us have been able to continue to work or get out and about – may your light shine whenever you are with others; some of us have felt quite isolated within our own homes – may you continue to explore different networks of support, through your radio and television, through phone calls and letters or online activities.

May your light shine, even in the darkest night.

At our APCM we have a chance to thank those who have served this community. We have thanked Philip for his commitment as churchwarden. The film which was produced for Heritage Open Days this year reflects Philip's love of our building and his vision for how it is a beacon of hope to the whole community. His passion to share the beauty of the Piper window with the widest possible audience, by acquiring John Piper's original sketch with Museums Sheffield, shows how Philip understands the power of light to illuminate our lives in surprising ways – when the sun shines through this window it transforms the church with colour and patterns which defy description.

I want to name just a few other people, amongst the many who have contributed so much to the life of this community since our last APCM.

Susan and Peter Whitmill have played their part in a typically unassuming manner for several years, collecting up cash donations, counting it and paying it into the bank. They have been looking to pass this responsibility on, and now is clearly the right time as we are handling a lot less cash and may well not return to the days of passing the plate around the congregation.

Susan and Peter – thank you for your dedication to a task which has been, in the most part, invisible but in a great many ways invaluable.

Another vital member of the finance team, Judith Pitchforth, our Parish Giving Officer, has handed over the baton to Tom Cottrell. Judith has also stayed mainly behind the scenes, supporting people to join one of our regular giving schemes: a weekly envelope, standing order or direct debit. Judith has worked alongside each Treasurer, supporting them in the payment of bills and the collection of cheques. We are immensely grateful to her for the many years she has worked in this role and the many thousands of pounds which she has administered on our behalf. Thank you Judith.

Tom, a warm welcome to the finance team. Tom has been attending St Mark's for a few years, is the father of Joseph

and Benjamin and husband to Helen. Alongside our Treasurer, Tom will be encouraging you to sign up to the Parish Giving Scheme since this provides the best continuity for financing the church in the long term. Please continue to give in whatever way you can but contact the office if you would like to be put in touch with Tom for more information about giving. Thank you, Tom and welcome to the team.

When I first joined St Mark's there was one name which I could not put a face to for some time. Joan Shaw regularly accompanied our youngest children in the creche, preparing materials never knowing whether anyone would be there, coming with enough for six only to discover that she had double the numbers... Always able to adapt and be creative, Joan has been a key player in the children's work team for, well, for ever! The families have already thanked her but today it is my turn to do so. Joan's profile is in this month's edition of St Mark's Messenger – it is a beautiful read. Thank you, Joan. Who knows how many people your ministry has touched in their earliest years in church?

We thanked Sarah Colver and will miss her ministry among us but I wish to pay tribute to Shan and Cate, colleagues without whom I simply could not have survived this last few months. Shan, thank you for the way that you have held together our network of pastoral care connections, working with James you have noticed who is well supported and who is at risk of becoming isolated, thank you.

Cate, your ability to bring us into the twenty-first century has been magnificent! Working with Sarah Rousseau you have enabled us to have an online presence which, for many people, has felt more meaningful than physical church. Cate is now fully trained and looking for her next opportunity so we wish you well in your discernment and are delighted that you will be with us a little longer.

The new PCC will have our work cut out for us. We need to consider our priorities for the next few years so that we can set achievable targets, including how to develop our staff team. We are working with a consultant who is helping us use the Mission Action Planning tool effectively. This is such an important time in the life of the church: a time to sustain our members and to be a beacon of hope for the wider community.

Because of your generosity we have chosen to employ a full-time Associate Vicar for many years. The PCC will be reviewing how best to increase the capacity of our staff team as soon as possible. Within the diocese and across the national church there are enormous challenges ahead; the reduction in church attendance and financial giving and fewer people offering to serve the church as full-time ministers have meant that many churches are having to make their way without clergy.

St Mary's Walkley will not be getting a new Vicar.

Does this mean that Walkley must lose its Church of England presence or do we change the expectations of the parish structure to encompass more churches under the leadership of fewer clergy? It's not easy and it will vary from place to place.

You have heard us talk about our **Mission Partnership** – a tentative arrangement between St Mark's, St John's, St Mary's, St Tim's and The Vine. St Tim's and the Vine have now decided to become one parish with one Vicar.

St Mary's, St Mark's and St John's have begun looking more seriously at what it would mean to work together as three churches with two Vicars. The PCC has been considering the implications of this and recently agreed to the proposal that I would become the Priest in Charge at St Mary's Walkley (as well as being the Incumbent here) and Matthew Rhodes would become the Associate Vicar there (as well as being the Incumbent at St John's).

Good partnerships are based on mutuality. St Mary's has a strong team of lay leaders and a clear vision for their church. They, quite rightly, believe that they have much to offer to St Mark's and St John's. During lockdown they identified that they could worship alongside us and have contributed to the leading of our worship. This has been an unexpected advantage over the last few months.

In order to make it clear that this is a 3-way partnership we have been asked to consider licensing all the clergy to all of the churches, so Matthew would also be licensed as Associate Vicar here and I would also be licensed as Associate Vicar there. For our PCC many questions emerged... does this mean Matthew would be our Associate Vicar and we wouldn't replace Sarah? No. Matthew is already an Incumbent and Area Dean, in many ways these roles are titles only, unless and until we see the way we operate as church quite differently.

If Matthew were to be taken ill or leave St John's would I be expected to cover their vacancy? (For that matter, if I were to be taken ill or leave St Mark's would Matthew be expected to cover ours?) As in any vacancy, the churchwardens would discuss the possibilities together and consider the implications.

A partnership involves mutual vulnerability and mutual sharing of strengths. If we pool our resources surely we can work more effectively - with refugees and asylum seekers, with the housebound and with students? Over the coming months we could consider what it means to share the responsibilities of safeguarding, we could work together in tackling inequality and injustice and be more effective fighting for environmental justice...

Of course there will be challenges ahead and we may lose some of our sense of being utterly unique but if we do this well we will complement each other and bring fresh insight to the ways we serve our broader mission area of Ranmoor, Walkley, Broomhill and Broomhall as churches which value inclusivity and equality.

Every deanery (a collection of about 12 churches) has been invited to join forces with a second deanery. We are in Hallam and we are partnering with Ecclesfield. We have been given a maximum number of clergy to serve across this much larger geographical area. Our Mission Partnership is just one amongst many which reduces the number of clergy.

This diocese is moving away from the model of an incumbent (the Vicar of St Mark's) to an oversight minister responsible for a team of parishes and workers, paid and unpaid. We are being invited to change our job descriptions now but when either Matthew or I move on that will no longer be a choice.

We can stand firm and refuse change, or we can adapt to change and develop new ways of being church within a partnership with congregations which have a very similar understanding of church.

Please, take some time to read through what I have just said and, if you want to respond, write to me and the churchwardens. We will do our best to include your hopes and concerns in our deliberations.

As the new PCC reviews our assets so we hope to be creative in the ways we can use them, not just to benefit our own worshipping community but also to reach out to those who are most in need in the areas around us, in the City of Sheffield and in our world. We have been richly blessed that we might be a blessing to others.

When we inherited large sums from the generous legacies of members of this church, we chose to invest money given to us from the sale of their homes into a new home for young people coming out of care. This has been such a successful partnership with the charity Roundabout that we have decided to invest in a second property.

We are utterly committed to this beautiful building and we are passionate about a gospel which liberates all people, a church which encourages our God-given gifts to grow whilst being an oasis for all who need refreshment from the demands of daily life.

Thank you to each and every one of you for your commitment to this church – to James Oliver who has agreed to serve alongside Pat as churchwarden, and to each person who has come forward to serve on your behalf on the PCC or Deanery Synod. It has been a challenging time to lead the church and I am grateful for a team of wise and committed colleagues to work alongside in the coming months.

Thank you to those who have decided that it is time to step back from their duties – to Rosie Hunt and Tanya Ralph – may you be blessed in all you are moving into.

May we, each of us, shine as a light in the world, to the glory of God.