

Vicar's report

What a year this has been! All of us have had times of feeling tested, frustrated, sorrowful and apprehensive. But the buds of spring are opening, and we see the signs of new life. There is hope now. The ongoing vaccine rollout and the long-expected easing of lockdown restrictions means that the future feels a little more certain for most of us.

As a church we have, of course been affected by the pandemic in many ways and continue to be so. But it is so important that, after this most difficult of times, we take a step back and look at what we have achieved together!

Even in the gloomiest days of lockdown, our worship as a community continued. When we were prevented by law from being together physically, we came together as a new online community, meaning even those members of our church family who were outside the UK were still able to join us. When I was prevented from even entering the building to celebrate the mass, we moved operations to the vicarage and continued our online community gathering from there. It was desperately important to me that we should still do that with all the dignity, reverence, and sense of joy that every service at St Mark's offers. I joined a number of other like-minded Priests and actively campaigned to be allowed to return to the building, which eventually succeeded.

Of course, this also meant taking great care with risk assessments and protocols, cleaning and rearranging how we work, to ensure the return was as safe as it could be for everyone who wished to enter. Balancing the conflicting

demands of people's freedom to worship against my own accountability for maintaining their safety was, and continues to be, a responsibility that weighs heavily. There is no 'right' answer to this, and it's impossible to satisfy everyone. I continue to see your safety as my first priority while seeking to lift all restrictions as quickly as is feasible. I shan't be sorry to see the projector screen return to its case and hymnals and service books reappear. But in the meantime I have been busy creating a set of new layouts for Liturgy for every season of the church year, that I'm hoping will transfer well to print, and will eventually provide more attractive looking printed material than we had before.

Early in the year I became ill with Covid-19, thankfully I was far luckier than many others and wasn't in hospital for very long. Sadly, for the month afterward that I was signed off work, no other local clergy were available to cover services at St Marks. As it is normally possible with reasonable notice to find cover in this area, this gives a glimpse of the level of pressure and workload all the Clergy were facing around this time. As the majority of local churches were also operating online, we were able to direct people to other services they could engage with while I began my recovery. I'm pleased to say I am now in better health, but Long Covid will, as the name suggests, be with me for some time and will continue take its toll on how much I can do.

I'm amazed to find I've actually enjoyed getting to grips with technology so we could come together as community online. We have offered prayer courses which have been accessible to more people than ever, a great lent course, Sunday morning online worship that's actually interactive, with people at home able to talk to each other and me during the service. Our prayers of

intercession have been able to include everyone who wanted names or thoughts to be shared. All our services can now be accessed at any time, we even had a fun-filled children's service at Christmas that could be accessed by families wherever they were and however their day was progressing. We have had evening prayer led over Zoom from Lagos!

Steep learning curves and the quirks of Facebook, Zoom and broadband connections have meant that it's not always been slick. But you the St Marks family has done what you always do, you've been patient, supportive, kind, encouraging, and had a sense of humour when things don't go entirely to plan.

That positive attitude tells me we have great potential with this technology for us to harness it in new ways and get better still Covid took a lot from all of us, but we are finding ways to make use of what we've learned from the challenges of this time.

I'm determined that with all the changes we have made in response to Covid, we must not leave anyone behind. So we are continuing to stream services at the same time as being in the building, and we keep them available online afterwards. This means that people who cannot access our building for whatever reason can still know that they are valued and loved members of our worshipping community. As a side note, this also means we have created an astonishing filmed archive of the life of St Marks as a worshipping community. It is already over a year in duration and I plan to keep it going indefinitely.

We have also been able to use our new relationship with technology to be more welcoming to families for baptism and weddings – including people who

cannot travel to mark important life events – and showing that love knows no geographical barriers. Another unexpected and hugely welcome success that has come from our ventures into online meeting technology has been the monthly St Marks Gardening Group set up by David Crompton. This has not only been a welcome social activity during lockdown, and a useful way to share insights and questions, it has created another opportunity for our community to grow closer together through shared interests.

We have connected with the local community in wonderful new ways. The restrictions of Covid on gatherings and on social distancing challenged me to have to re-imagine practically every church service pattern for an entire liturgical year. Working out what we could still do, what we would have to do differently, and what in a small number of cases we simply could not safely do was a massive and very demanding task. And it was also a once in a lifetime opportunity to really re-think every service rather than simply reaching for what had been done before. The work may have been hard and time-consuming, but the numbers of people who have engaged in the services and given their enthusiastic support and encouragement has made it all worthwhile.

Some of the new ideas I've enjoyed adding to our offerings this year include: A house blessing for Epiphany, a participatory service to do at home for Ash Wednesday, Heart prayer cards for valentine's day, our online advent calendar which involved a huge number of talented people in our community, the Away in a Manger Challenge, some beautiful card crosses for people to use at home for Holy Week.

While its often hard to quantify the impact and reach of what we do as a worshipping community, ironically the restrictions of Lockdown have actually provided us with some measurable outcomes. We can see from our Facebook statistics that our online services were regularly engaged with by far higher numbers of people than we typically see in church. It has not been uncommon to see over a hundred engagements with a live streamed and saved online service. Unsurprisingly the figures for Easter Services and Remembrance Sunday were especially high. The material I created and placed in church for people take away also give us positive news on our engagement, touching literally hundreds of people. Over a hundred painted Jesus stones were given out from the church in the weeks leading up to Christmas, to become focal points for people's Christmas devotions. There was a similar level of uptake for blessed chalk and house blessing cards, I posted a number of these to people who could not collect one from church but had requested them after seeing my Facebook and Twitter Posts.

We have become an ACTS 435 church which responds to people's practical needs by working with a national website, to match people wishing to donate to help someone in need with those people who have significant immediate need. This is life-changing work. Our posts on local, national and international forums have led to more people than ever knowing that St Mark's is alive and that we care for them, whether they would call themselves Christian or not.

That visibility has shown itself in the large number of people reaching out to me for prayer or just to talk. The impact of Covid on people's mental and spiritual wellbeing over the last year has been abundantly clear to me as I have

engaged with and tried to support those who come to me for guidance, reassurance or simply to have someone to talk to.

I've been delighted over the past year to note the growing diversity in our congregations, both in the building and online, and I think our increased online visibility has helped that. We will not stop doing these things when all restrictions are over and life returns to what we like to call 'normal'. Being a church for all people means something so much deeper and wider now.

And within all of this, we have kept the building standing even though it seems to have done its best to frustrate us with boiler problems, pipes, leaks ... strange smells that we can't locate the source of ...

In fact over the year we've improved our building and our maintenance capability. We now have trusted and competent boiler engineers, plumbers, electricians, and roofing contractors. We now have put energy efficient lighting inside, fixed the outside lighting which had been broken for decades, and our long overdue electrical safety inspection and gutter clearance have been done.

Of course, many things have been lost. Concerts had to be postponed, the coffee mornings, the community choir, Pints of View, the social events, the games afternoons, the Little Lions group ... sadly all were deferred for a while. But these things can start happening again soon. And with them, the dreams that we have been having of recital series', youth groups, student groups, comedy evenings, plays and musicals, children's services, courses and discussion and prayer groups to deepen the spiritual lives of ourselves and those wondering who this man Jesus is, looking at the building to make it more accessible and providing a real community hub with things going on for all

sorts of people with all sorts of needs. Offering warmth and hospitality in a cold world. I still want to sort out a welcoming space for the children we love having here ... and I promise they will be encouraged to come back to serving at the altar beside me as soon as possible.

And although sadly the vestry pre-school decided to close its doors for good last summer, the longstanding and rapidly growing debt St Marks owed the pre-school has been properly brought to light and addressed. With the help of the Diocese and Kathryn Laurensen an agreement has been reached to end the growth and allow us to pay off the balance over time. This means we can now engage with potential new users of the building. This engagement is under way, is wholeheartedly supported by the Diocese, and is progressing well. Unlike the previous arrangement with the pre-school, this can now be on a proper contractual and financial footing, which will ultimately help us to fund God's mission to the parish

It's that mission which always must inform and direct everything we do here. We are here to care and love, and the number of people who need our care and love seems to grow daily. Being a Christian in a world where so many have felt pain never known to them before, is going to be different.

I am so proud of what St Mark's achieves and I know that we can and will respond to those new needs. Most of all I am so grateful for all the love and support the St Marks family has shown me over the past year, and for the support you continue to give me as I continue my recovery post Covid.

Our banner in the porch has never been more relevant: Whoever you are, whatever you have been, whatever you hope to be ... you are welcome at St Mark's Hamilton Terrace.

I have lots of people to thank and I will do that during the APCM after this service so for now, let's pray together for the life of St Marks'

Loving God

You bring us together in our brokenness and with our strengths,

With our doubts and with our certainties

With our questions and our wisdom

Help us to remember that we are your precious people,

Put here at this time for your purpose

We remember that each of us have a part to play in your mission of bringing wholeness to the world and that St Mark's is a powerful place full of powerful people when we act in the grace and strength of your spirit.

Surround us with your love

And let nothing but love flow from us and between us.

Thy will be done here as it is in heaven.

Amen

Thanks

First to my churchwardens who have stood with me and helped to deal with some very difficult situations this year. I can't begin to say how grateful I am to them and how impossible this role would have been without their particular skills, energy and willingness to get on with stuff. They are also a fabulous personal support.

Gladys – is standing down from Deanery Synod after three years, which means she also stands down from the PCC. The Deanery Synod role is a vital one and helps us to understand what is going on in the deanery and wider diocese. It keeps us connected with what God is doing in the church beyond St John's Wood.

Gladys also got involved when I asked for volunteers to help with the administration of the ACTS 435 project I spoke about earlier. She's a true star! Gladys isn't here today but I wanted to have huge thanks minuted. I will make sure she gets a present too!

Kate McCure has served over 10 years on the PCC and has been our Children's Champion and latterly our safeguarding officer – both essential roles. She's definitely done her time and I truly can't thank her enough. I am beyond grateful.

Dan, the choir and organists -You are a key part of what makes our worship here so wonderful and uplifting. You support the liturgy with reverence and joy. It's amazing to see how much you have come together as a group of people, especially as you weren't able to sing together for so long. You are

willing to take chances and to entertain my daft ideas. I am so thankful for your positivity and your hard work in what has been a pretty tough year for church music.

Then there is the rest of the PCC who will get fed chocolates, cake and wine at our next meeting! Thank you for everything you have done to support me and for all the roles you've taken on. Every vicar needs a PCC they can rely on to be enthusiastic and open, who will have their back and will support them to keep the church's activities going and to work through the inevitable difficulties in ministering to a community. Even working on Zoom you have been willing to share your views when many would have found it difficult to engage.

Eric, you have worked really hard with your mop and dusters. Thank you!

Gerlinde, your flower displays and your work on the church gardens is hugely appreciated. You create beauty!

Naa, Sheila and Josie, David and Benjamin (who aren't here) have been wonderful as servers supporting the liturgy. They also help me to pray and prepare spiritually for services. They are absolutely indispensable and I am so grateful.

There are so many other people who serve quietly on rotas or who step in to help keep things running. Know that you are seen, loved and your work is appreciated. St Mark's needs us all and I am more thankful than you will ever know.