

ST MARY THE VIRGIN RIVERHEAD WITH DUNTON GREEN LAY MINISTER'S REPORT 2019-2020

Few people would disagree that the 18 months which have passed since the last APCM in April 2019 have been momentous. But it must be the most helpful and positive way to approach the review of that time, to trace God's enormous goodness to us as a Church Family, to praise and thank Him for all His blessings to us, and to be heartened and encouraged by all He has done for us.

In March 2019 we had said goodbye and Godspeed to Martin and Maggie and we were in a way still mourning their departure. But Martin's wisdom and graciousness in choosing to leave us before Easter meant – as he foresaw, that we started the interregnum – the new phase of our Church's life - by celebrating Easter – the Resurrection of our Lord and moving forward positively and in hope -from there. He could so easily have chosen to go out 'on a high note' having led us through all the Easter celebrations, and left us contending with the inevitable reaction of despondency and pessimism which would have followed. But he didn't, and we owe him a debt of gratitude for that, and for arranging for Archdeacon Julie Conalty to come and lead our Easter morning worship last year, which was beautiful and uplifting.

Throughout the interregnum we have been enormously blessed by so many people who have come and continue to come to lead our worship. Some of them were already established friends of St Mary's, especially Anne Bourne and Lynette Leithead both of whom have served us lovingly and regularly, not only in our Sunday services but with Baptisms and Weddings as well. To know that they were there, always willing to help has been a huge blessing. But a special mention must be made of Peter Flynn, who has been enormously faithful and conscientious in his ministry to us over many years, and willingly came regularly to lead services for us - some memorable services incorporating Baptisms of lively babies and toddlers, complete with their equally lively Baptismal parties! We have formed invaluable friendships with Christopher Johnson, already previously known to some of the church family and Michael Gentry, both of whom have committed to leading our worship every month. Their different styles of ministry have been a real encouragement and blessing to us.

We've also been blessed to get to know other clergy who we might never have welcomed to St Mary's had it not been for the interregnum. Lindsay Llewellyn MacDuff led a wonderful Baptism service for us, and Anne Le Bas helped us with weddings. More recently it was a joy to have our worship led by Sue Fauchon-Jones. We owe a debt of gratitude to Jane Winter, Bishop Simon Burton Jones – Bishop of Tonbridge, who joined us for Christmas, Bishop Rod Thomas – Bishop of Maidstone, who led a marvellous Harvest thanksgiving, Angus MacLeay, and Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, who led us in an inspirational New Year's Day service of dedication. All of these lovely people have made time out of busy schedules to visit us more than once, and we now count them as our friends.

They have all shared God's love and goodness with us, and been a blessing and encouragement to us, and we thank God for each one of them.

Mentioning individuals in reports such as this can highlight unintended omissions and cause pain, but since the last APCM we have also lost dear friends from our church family Harry Garrett, Jo Howe and Edna Bennett. All three, people who lived and died well, trusting in our Saviour. Their passing marks the end of an era.

But we also really rejoiced last summer, to celebrate the amazing wedding of Geoff and Julia. 60 years of marriage with Bryan and Margaret Nicholas was another wonderful milestone, as was also the unique wedding of Bennet and Suzanne Smith – which many of us joined via zoom!. Neither of the last two events happened as planned as they were during lockdown or with Covid-19 restrictions, but were nevertheless a real source of joy and blessing to them – and to us all. Diane Williams stepped down from serving us so generously as church warden in the past 18 months. When that role is filled as ably as Diane did, so much of what is done by them behind the scenes can go by unremarked. We owe Diane a huge debt of gratitude, as we do our current wardens, Alison and Rachel, and Stuart, our Treasurer and all the PCC and indeed so many people who continue quietly and faithfully to serve God through their service to our church family.

A different, but no less real encouragement was the Diocesan organised visit of clergy from Estonia. We welcomed Deacon Ülle Reimann from Maarja Magdaleena Church in Tallinn to our Sunday morning service, and she was able to speak to us afterwards in the church hall.

We enjoyed carol singing in the Ryewood estate with our friends from Bessels Green Baptist Church, specifically those who provide various community activities through Faithworks, their outreach work in Dunton Green. We and they are committed to looking at new ways we can work together to share the Good News of Jesus with the people of Dunton Green – another very positive development in our church family life.

Our ongoing links with Sevenoaks Kenya Education Trust (SKET) and David and Jane Debenham, led to a memorable Harvest lunch, wonderfully organised by Sunday Club. It has strengthened our links with Leah, the girl whose education we fund, and Sunday Club have helped to provide.

Last year some of us attended a lovely service in Rochester Cathedral to mark the end of the Archbishops' prayer initiative, Thy Kingdom Come. This year, as a result of Coronavirus, we had to find other, mostly virtual ways to mark Thy Kingdom Come, but nevertheless some people did commit to added specific times of prayer for church and country.

Similarly, Ride and Stride continues to be supported and, while this year lockdown restrictions have affected us all, people of all ages turned out again from St Mary's – mostly to stride.

VE day provided an added opportunity for us to strengthen our links with the parish councils of Riverhead and Dunton Green respectively. We have of course always led Remembrance Sunday worship for both villages, but the zoom VE Day service was a unique joint community service. We look forward to finding new ways of working with them to serve our communities.

But of course, the hugely significant process which was already in hand before the beginning of the interregnum was, as a result of our historic decision to join with St. Luke's and St Mary Kippington, to become a united benefice and a team ministry. It has been a real encouragement to work with their PCCs and church families and to get to know many folk there as we went through this process which was completed – very appropriately at an Advent Service. One hugely significant development and encouragement from this union has been the joint prayer meeting. The whole process has also given us all some exciting glimpses of what we could become, together in God's service, and the new possibilities and opportunities for service to others, available to us as we learn to work together and so grow closer to each other. It was, therefore, a great encouragement to us all to welcome Mark Bridgen, along with Karen and their family, as the Team Rector of the newly formed West Sevenoaks Team. His advice, encouragement and affirmation has been heart-warming, and makes the appointment of our new incumbent a closer reality, which is another real encouragement.

Of course Coronavirus has been the huge, unwelcome but life changing event that has coloured everything since the beginning of the year and is the reason why 18 months have elapsed since our last annual meeting. The repercussions continue. We have all felt its unsettling effects but for some people they have been entirely painful, frightening and/or isolating. Our concern as church – Jesus' Body here on earth – His eyes, ears and hands must always be first to love and care for those who are needy and vulnerable - the lost and the forgotten. We must continue urgently to offer them and everyone else the wonderful comfort and loving kindness that God has so freely given us, which He longs for them and everyone, everywhere to know.

There have also been unexpected blessings and encouragements. One such blessing has been our zoom services and the sustained commitment from the church family to support them. While the midweek Communion service in Dunton Green had to stop, we have since started a weekly virtual coffee morning. We look forward to being able to reinstate the Communion service as soon as safely possible.

Our virtual weekly Compline service has been a wonderful initiative, which is greatly valued by those who join, and is undoubtedly here to stay.

So, as we review the past 18 months, we recognise that life will not go back to what it was, but that a new normal will somehow emerge. There are immediate challenges as we make the transition back into our church building and plan for a very different Christmas. But we should go forward heartened by the extraordinary last 18 months. We can look back and see God's amazing goodness to us as a church family through good, bad, sad and perplexing times. We can go forward with renewed confidence in His amazing love, trusting Him to lead and guide us to love and serve Him and each other, so that more people see our Saviour more clearly and come to know Him for themselves.

These words are a fitting summary as we look back – and forward

How good is the God we adore,
Our faithful, unchangeable Friend,

Whose love is as great as His power,
And knows neither measure nor end.

Tis Jesus – the First and the Last
Whose Presence will guide us safe home.
We'll thank Him for all that is past
And trust Him for all that's to come.

Daphne Harrison
October 2020