

The Vicar's Annual Report 2020

At the beginning of 2020, churchwardens, leaders of sub-committees and ministry team members (defined as those who regularly lead or preach in our collective worship) gathered with leaders from other churches in the Benefice at the Diocesan Retreat House in Pleshey to review the shared life of the churches and begin to discern what may be next for us. Under Christ, we determined that our core values as a Benefice are **faith, love and community** and that we seek to live those out **by welcoming all, caring and teaching so that we may change lives through sharing the love of God in Christ.**

Community is at the heart of both the early church and the ongoing life of followers of Jesus. The disciples gathered around Jesus to learn from Him, and then as the number of followers grew, St. Luke writing in Acts records that “all who believed were together and had all things in common ... day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. This is a vision of a group of people transformed and sharing what they had for the common good as well as for their shared life. Thanks to God, our parish finances are in relatively good health, and we too have seen the church grow (there were 26 baptisms in 2019 and we presented 10 candidates for confirmation) but it is important never to let complacency get in the way of our common life. We are all called to give sacrificially of our time and talents and of our finances in order that the ministry of Christ may continue and grow in the parish.

I continue to be struck by and appreciative of the small army of people who give their skills and expertise. As ever, particular thanks must go to our Churchwardens (Mary Gill and Michael Palmer) for all they have done going often well beyond the call of duty in the service of Christ and His Church. I am deeply grateful to Andrew Tunks for the quiet and disciplined way he continues to serve as our Treasurer, and also to Carole Fenton who as Verger looks after and banks cash donations each week. In 2019, we held a Stewardship Campaign and I would like to record my thanks to all the members of the team who organized that (and have done so again this year) and to Richard Risdon in particular for his leadership in this area. There are so many others who contribute in so many ways, thank you to you all for everything you do. St Mary's would not be the special place it is without your ministry. In particular thank you to Vicky Rowland, Hugh Meteyard and Joy Simmance and the team of “postpeople” who do so much to produce our monthly sheet – there are not many parishes that continue to attempt to deliver to every home every month.

Some highlights of the year included welcoming all the pupils and staff of Theydon Bois Primary School to the church for worship at Harvest, our Christingle services which again saw the church full twice over, and the time spent preparing the Christingles the day before. It was a real team effort to prepare the church for Christmas and Advent, and it would be wrong not to note my appreciation of the way in which Carole Risdon faithfully prepared and tended the Advent wreath, and the work of the team of flower arrangers who decorated the church so beautifully for Christmas as they have done throughout the year. I would also like to record my thanks to Hugh Meteyard and all choir members and our organists who do so much to enhance our worship. Particularly, I would like to thank Hugh for the all he does in assisting me to put together Orders of Service for special occasions, which this year included hosting a sizable Deanery Confirmation.

Sadly in 2019, we mourned the passing of among others Marjorie Rippon and Heather Higgins. Marjorie had been a member of St Mary's for many years and the majority of the new hymnbooks were donated in her memory. Heather had only been part of St Mary's for a much shorter time, but her influence was no less significant. She was a member of the PCC and always challenged the council to consider the ways in which we could share the Good News of Jesus more widely, and in her memory sizable donations have been given to St Mary's to fund an upgrade to our audio-visual system in the years ahead.

The Safeguarding of children, young people and vulnerable adults is a key priority. Marion Smith has continued to be our Parish Safeguarding Representative, making sure that we are doing all we can to be Good News as well as talk about it through looking after the vulnerable. St Mary's has been blessed with opportunities to connect with significant number of children and their families. Louise Whelan and Jennifer Fry continue to run our weekly Thursday Moring Pram Group, providing a safe space to play for pre-schoolers and their carers (not forgetting Jenny Turner and others who serve refreshments each week). In 2019, Samantha Lowrie from the Red Balloon Family Foundation has continued to leading our groups for

children and young people during our Sunday worship. The number of children in the groups was at the end of the year, averaging 30, and for the first time a regular group of children who are towards the latter end of primary school have been studying the Bible more intently in age appropriate ways. St Mary's cannot escape the challenge that to work effectively with the families of the children who have attended groups on Sunday would take more time than she is able to give and the next stage in the development of the work of the church would be to seek to employ a Children and Families Worker as other churches of a similar size have done. We have continued to benefit from Sarah Bowen's work as our part-time paid Benefice Administrator, and she does a great deal behind the scenes to ensure that the Occasional Offices take place so smoothly.

At the recent Deanery Congress, Bishop Peter began the presentation with words from Isaiah 43:18-19; "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing" – and I believe as we look forward together this an important principle to keep in mind. There are challengers, both financial and in terms of the need for volunteers to support the many ministries and roles in the church, but I believe we should this need as an opportunity for growth, both as individuals and as a community rather than a threat.

March 2020

Since my writing the annual report, much has changed. At the annual meeting in 2021, there will be opportunity to reflect more fully on the ways in which the world has changed and the impact it has had on each of the Theydon Parishes. But for now, I would like to add my particular thanks and appreciation to everyone who has served in new ways to enable our worshipping life to continue during the period when our building was closed as we have begun to re-inhabit the sacred spaces of the Benefice. In particular Tim Adams transformed into a video producer working with Carol and I to put together our recorded services from late March to July. Our choir moved online and we were blessed by their recorded anthems in latter months – this was not a small undertaking and it was thanks to Hugh Meteyard's leadership that they came together. We have been worshipping on Zoom on Sunday evenings and midweek, and it has been good to join with old friends now living in different parts of the country in our services. Our children and young people were able to receive activities to do a home thanks to the Red Balloon Family Boxes, and we began a new youth group with some of our older primary school age young people online, which will continue into September. Thank you to the small army of people behind the scenes who among other things, looked out for neighbours, did shopping, and dropped off printed notice sheets.

The challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic are not over, and there are still many challenges to face. Please pray for the Hall Management team, as they work to reopen the building for the community, pray for all those involved in leading worship as we adjust to services with physical distancing and begin to plan for Harvest, the season of remembrance in November and a Christmas which will more than likely be very different, pray for those who lost a loved one and who were not able to have the funeral they had wished for, pray for those who have postponed weddings and hope to marry in 2021, and above all, please continue to pray for the witness of St Mary's Theydon Bois and all the parishes that we may be witnesses to the unchanging hope for tomorrow found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.