

Vicar's Report of 2021 (for 2022 APCM)

The global pandemic affected the church, community and nation in any number of different ways, not all negatively, but there is little doubt that it turned normal life upside-down. Just as the report for 2020 was greatly influenced by the impact of covid, so is this report for the year 2021.

We began 2021 in a second lockdown, in the middle of winter and without the sense of novelty we'd experienced in March 2020. Everything was closed, it was cold, dark and difficult. Church consisted of endless zoom meetings, a great blessing in many ways but always leaving one feeling a little disconnected. Sunday services were streamed from the church, where a small group were allowed to deliver the service/sermon at the front and record and film at the back.

We ran a Well Being group, Lent Course, prayer times and the usual PCC and committee meetings online, with the familiar phrases repeated each time 'are you there? We can't see you?' and 'you're on mute!' Even a PCC Away Day became a zoom, so we added exotic locations to our backgrounds.

Church finally reopened after 3 months of being closed to the congregation on Sunday 14th March, and little Joshua was baptised to mark a new beginning. The building has been open ever since, but covid was far from leaving us all alone.

I have not known a more challenging time in ministry, and I know that church leaders all across the country have reflected the same sense of tiredness, a lack of momentum and motivation, attempts to reach out to people had mixed responses as many, even to the end of the year, understandably remained cautious to mix because of the pandemic

Covid had the effect of forcing many to work from home, and this produced a mixed response. For some it meant less commuting and more time with family; for others it produced a profound sense of isolation from the company of others in the workplace. In a few cases the impact devastated jobs, including Ben, the husband of our Ministry Team Leader Lydia, and they decided as a result to relocate to the west country. We were sad to see them go as Lydia had just begun to make a very positive impact when the second lockdown started.

Meetings and gatherings continued with a mixture of zoom or in-person, with risk assessments and conversations happening week by week about what seemed safe or unsafe, face coverings on or off, what are the latest government guidelines or rules.

Despite these challenges we had a joyful Easter and were sad to say goodbye to Ann & David Smith, who have retired to Wales. We continue to miss their friendship and inspiring ministry.

In the second half of the year we were able to see signs of a welcome return to a new normal. Holiday at Home took place in August, organised by Marilyn. It was a joyful and well attended day, and showed just what a delight it is to speak to one another face to face again. Mary and Helen started a New Mums group on a Wednesday which has continued since, and proved to be a very popular and helpful way for those disconnected through the pandemic to meet others and enjoy company.

In September a very successful day was held for folk to climb to the top of the Tower, organised by Phil. Many folk from the local area and beyond visited and negotiated the steep steps to the top, enjoying a cuppa when they completed the trip. Community lunch resumed on the 3rd Wednesday of each month and it has been a joy to bring people together in this way, along with the Friendship Café on the first Thursday of the month. Thanks to Angela and Gill for their leadership of these regular events, as well as Kate who now oversees the meal at Community lunch.

Thankfully too our ministry with young people and children continued in late 2021, despite the lack of a paid staff member to oversee this. The Youth Club got up and running on Friday nights, mainly attracting young people not from church families. Kids Church started again on Sundays with a regular team of helpers and a Monday ABC started back in October. A big thankyou to the group of volunteers overseeing these groups.

Earlier in the year the Easter Trail was outside but a vibrant Light Party on 31 October, organised by Matthew & Catherine, proved to be a huge success and attracted large numbers of families. A Nativity Trail in December also went very well and it was a delight to return to allowing congregations to attend the Christmas carol service and Christingles in person.

Dan Greenwood, our Premises Manager, resigned from employment here in the autumn. The PCC were pleased to be able to continue to accommodate Dan, Danielle and Mark in the church flat until they find a suitable alternative home. We are very grateful to Dan for his years of serving the church in a paid and volunteer capacity taking care of the building, assisting with children's and youth ministry, managing the football team and caring for people in the church family in many ways.

In the autumn our church administrator Gemma decided to return to her previous area of employment in a local primary school. We are grateful to her for several years of work in the office, where she served the church with diligence, creativity and efficiency. In a voluntary capacity Gemma also organised a number of the successful children's events, most recently the lockdown outdoor trails at Christmas and Easter.

We are delighted that Catherine, who continues to be the church Finance Assistant, has now added to her role that of administrator and has taken that on very capably and enthusiastically in the church office.

I am grateful for the team who oversee livestreaming and all things technical at the back of church. Throughout the lockdown and beyond, Phil, Ken and Paul Williamson have kept the show running cheerfully and efficiently.

The Ministry Team have adapted to preaching on zoom, recording sermons, speaking to an empty church or a full church and I am grateful to Angela, Sue, Cath and Paul who have led us in this way. We were delighted to send Renate out into self-supporting ministry and she was ordained at the end of September, now ministering in nearby Footscray.

Throughout the year the Pastoral Team, and others in the congregation, have been faithful in their constant care of those in our congregation who are particularly isolated or unwell, through visits, phonecalls and practical help, such as lifts. Every month the team meet to go through a list of around 40 people to ensure they are receiving attention, prayer and support

Our musicians and singers had to cope with leading worship when congregational singing was banned for many months, and all that could be seen was a sea of masks, but they led us admirably.

Thanks too go to the Safeguarding team, now headed up by Rachel Dixon; the team who look after the church grounds, the flower team, Debt Advice team, those who serve coffee and provide lunches. Thanks to all who serve in many and various ways not mentioned in this report.

It was a delight to welcome Bishop Simon, who despite his busy diary, responded to a request to come and anoint the congregation for their ministry in the workplace and community. Bishop James retired in the summer and we wish him well for a happy and healthy retirement.

Our links to overseas and home mission continues, particularly in Uganda, Tanzania and Namibia, as well as the Well Being UK charity KintsugiHope. We are grateful to Ken, who was overseeing these links and since 2021 the oversight has recently passed on to Matthew & Catherine Humphries.

Many months after Joan Ruthven died the church became aware of a substantial legacy from her estate. This has come at a very timely moment, with the church giving having been affected by covid, and the PCC are discussing how to use this incredibly generous gift. Joan was deeply fond of young people and a fair proportion of the legacy will help us to pay the cost of employing a new Team Leader for families and children, at least for a while. We thank God for the memory of Joan and for her great kindness in leaving such a kind gift.

There are a few people I want to particularly thank. Our church wardens, Heather and Phil, have worked incredibly hard in challenging circumstances and I am so grateful to them for their loyalty, encouragement and wisdom. The PCC have also worked hard and I am grateful to Margaret, who stepped down as Secretary in May, and Angela who has taken over. Gina, our Treasurer, has continued to do a fantastic job overseeing our accounts, in difficult times. As always, I want to thank my lovely wife, Cath, who gives me constant encouragement, support and strength.

All in all 2021 finished in a much more positive manner than it began, with much of the worst of the pandemic and restrictions behind us. It will take time, however, as with all sections of the community, for the church to recover from this and rebuild. Thankfully God has a habit of taking the broken pieces of our lives and making something new, almost certainly stronger and better than it was before. After all, we are people of the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead!