

3D Volume 2

Still Building, Still Listening: a 'Lockdown' Annual Vicar's Report

Writing an annual report in, to put it mildly, unusual and unprecedented circumstances, it is tempting to focus only on the current situation. However, our Annual Meeting is supposed to be an opportunity to review a whole year, and it is important that our pre-lockdown life does not fade into the background!

So, firstly, my reflections on the majority of the past year – the period from April 2019 to March 2020. Well, as I have written every year so far, St Christopher's continues to be the most rewarding and encouraging church of which to be vicar: I only hope that everyone's experience of our common life is as positive as mine. It's invidious to select certain aspects and events, but to me one hallmark of our shared life is the way in which people work together with positivity and faith to ensure that the things we do are done well, and to the glory of God. For example:

- Putting on special events, such as our four carol services and two evening concerts, which bring large numbers into the building;
- Providing a welcoming and memorable experience for those who come to us for 'occasional offices' (Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals);
- Ensuring that our weekly worship never feels tired or 'routine';
- Reaching out to and working with and for our school community;
- Looking outward in giving, prayer, service and pastoral care, within our parish and beyond;
- Nurturing our children and young people in the faith;
- Encouraging all our members to grow in knowledge and in faith;
- Maintaining and improving our building and grounds;
- Providing good online and printed communications.

So I would want to take this opportunity to express my appreciation of the many, many ways in which our church family faithfully serve God together. But I'd also like to return to something I wrote in last year's report:

*'I would want to add a note of warning: against complacency, against sitting back and relying on those good things in our life together which have been built up over past years. To do so is like living off yesterday's capital without putting anything into the bank for tomorrow. So, I believe that this is not a time to live off the past, but to **build for the future**'.*

Of course, at that point it was still possible that 'building for the future' would include the physical stones and mortar of our church room project: in the end we decided not to go ahead. But that challenge to build the church *spiritually* for the future remained. It led to this year's plan to discern in what ways God wanted us to build with him; a plan we dubbed 'Upward and Onward'.

Of course, our original plans for UAO have been thrown into disarray; as has all of our church life. It was centred on two meetings for the whole church family, one in May (tomorrow, as I write!), and one in July. But the imperative to build the church – with God as the Master Builder – remains. Indeed, it becomes even more urgent. In pre-Covid days we faced many challenges: the increasing secularisation of our culture; the unprecedented pressures on our children and young people; spiralling costs; our own ageing. It was to face these and other challenges that we needed to ensure our church was strong and well-built. And now we face all of the above; together with the new and peculiar challenges of re-forming our life as a church in a world shaped by the pandemic.

With challenges, though, there come opportunities. It has been observed in recent weeks that the current situation is prompting many to review and re-assess the whole basis of their lives and of their worldview: it is often at such times that people become open to the hope, peace and meaning which only God can provide. Here again is reason for us to be a strong, well-built, Christian community; not desperately clinging on to conserve what we have, or to recoup what we used to have, but healthy, strong, confident and faithful enough to look outward; ready to seize those opportunities to ‘share the hope which is within us’.

It would be a mistake to think, ‘we have had our unforeseen shock: soon we can get back to normal’. The one thing we should learn from the present experience is that the future is *always* unforeseen. Who knows what else lies ahead? Only the Lord. We can’t predict: but we can *prepare*. We can build, let *God* build, our spiritual house, according to his plans and blueprint.

‘The best time to fix the roof is when the sun is shining’, goes the well-known phrase. We have to make sure that, during the ‘good’ times, we don’t sit back and coast along, but rather we build the church (always recognising that God is the Builder). Our current experience illustrates this well. I don’t underestimate the suffering, and disruption, caused by the current crisis; but I have also been heartened by many signs that our faith and our fellowship, our ministry and service, as a church, remain strong. If that is so, it has not ‘just happened’; it has come about because we are reaping now the benefits of having built, in easier times, a church which has those characteristics.

And we need to go on building. How do we do this? Well, at the heart of it is listening to God, and to one another. We were to do this via our UAO meetings, and associated discussions and reflections. We still need to do it. I hope that as we navigate the rest of this pandemic period – and beyond – we will do so with our ears open as to what God is saying to us about His calling, His plans: for each one of us, and for us together as His Church.

David Swales, 15th May 2020