

Vicar's Report, APCM 2022.

This is the last of over 50 annual meetings which I will attend as the resident clergy person. There are many, many things I will miss about being a vicar – and especially about being a vicar here – but I must admit APCMs are not all that high up the list. Over the years I've had many dull ones, some challenging, and a few painful. I'm glad to say that none of those have been here: as always, the folk of Pott Church make APCMs a positive experience; and I've been blessed to have efficient PCC secretaries, and also an excellent lay chair, making it a very easy experience for me.

Indeed, few of us attend because we actually enjoy APCMs. But they do, nevertheless, play an important part in our shared life. Firstly they lay the proper legal groundwork to enable us to continue our mission, ministry and worship. But they also help us to do something else which is very important: stop, step back, and take stock of where God has been at work, where he has led us, and where he may be leading us.

I'm afraid I might go down in Pott history as the vicar who spoke a lot about leading the church in this stocktaking – reflecting, listening, looking to God for direction – but didn't actually *do* much of it. And certainly, if you consider that our 2020 'Upward and Onward' was to be a cornerstone of that process, and that it was stymied by the pandemic, then the record is not great. And now I'm on my way before we ever got, perhaps, the chance to re-visit that particular initiative.

Fortunately, though, God is not so easily stymied. Somebody once said, 'If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans'; our own plans might have been frustrated – but that *doesn't* stop us from being a listening, reflecting, vision-seeking people; and it certainly doesn't stop *God* from leading us. Surely, the challenges of the last couple of years have actually required us to be *more* open and responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Certainly, they have forced us out of the perennial tendency to just 'keep on doing what we've always done'; change, flexibility, trying new things, taking risks, has actually become an essential part of keeping going from week to week and month to month.

Indeed, may I pay particular tribute to all those who, in any way, have helped us steer a course through the pandemic, and emerge still positive, faithful and joyful. Where else but Pott Shrigley would the answer to a limit on numbers for a popular carol service be to move it under the stars: singers, brass band, projector and all?! Or, come to that, the much-valued refreshments after the service, or, last summer, the weekly service itself? To say nothing of managing the complexities of welcoming people back into church

while the pandemic was still in full swing, holding groups and meetings via Zoom or WhatsApp and, of course, our ground-breaking livestream.

I recently reviewed my previous contributions to this meeting, and there's one consistent theme: a heartfelt gratitude of the way in which the folk of this church community make my job never less than a joy and pleasure. The phrase, 'best job in the Church of England' crops up more than once. My prayer is that you never lose that spirit, which marks you out in my experience of church. There may – there *will* – be times of disagreement and debate, of struggle and discouragement; choppy waters lie ahead for God's church, including here. But I do pray that the spirit of encouragement, affirmation, mutual support and acceptance which have been my experience here will always be present. It is very precious; it is a gift from God: don't squander it.

And this isn't just because, as a favourite aunt of mine used to say, 'It's nice to be nice'. It's because, united by the bond and peace of the Holy Spirit, you are able to be *much* more effective as a church. I've seen how a readiness to quarrel, or to take offence, can weaken a church's worship, ministry and witness. And 'worship, ministry and witness' is what we're about: exalting God with our praise, building up our common life, sharing and deepening faith. Indeed, these are the very things that our listening, vision-seeking, are for: What does God want for His church here? What are His plans? and, of course, What part does He call each one of us to play in that?

Think for a minute of all the work we acknowledge in our meeting today; the many ways in which folk serve God in the life of this church. Do you ever find yourself thinking 'where would we be if so-and-so wasn't doing this, or that'? Then ask yourself, 'Where will the so-and-so's of tomorrow come from?'. The answer is that God *will* raise them up, but that He can't do so if we aren't a listening, faithful, serving church; keeping Jesus and His Gospel and His Truth at the centre, responding to His call – even when that is difficult. I think that is why I'm delighted that virtually the last thing I'll be involved in here will be a significant act of Gospel outreach – Festival Manchester.

If we are faithful to the Gospel, in our own lives, in our shared life and ministry together, then God will be faithful in building His church – even this beautiful little corner of it, here at Pott Shrigley.

David Swales, May 2022