

Rector's Reflection for St. Mary's Annual Church Meeting 25th March 2024

*'Restore our fortunes O Lord, like streams in the desert.
Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy' Psalm 126:3-4*

Six years ago, at the start of 2018, this was the word I shared with the church, setting our vision for the next season of our church family life, and summarised as: 'a season of sowing'. After a long period of (numerically at least) gentle decline, there was a general sense that we were turning a corner, and our heartfelt prayer was, therefore, for restoration, for new streams of life emerging. We saw the first fruits of that before the pandemic: our average attendance grew in 2019 for the first time in some years, and initiatives like Café Church launched successfully.

...and then came covid. A once-in-a-century global pandemic, and dislocation of all our familiar routines. Church buildings had not been closed for worship since the last truly global influenza pandemic of 1919. How would we cope? For all the pain and disruption... very well, as it turned out. Our season of sowing continued: the online worship and ministry we launched spread much further than we had dared to hope, and relationships deepened, if anything, as people looked out for each other. Our volunteer culture survived, and, as restrictions eased, we now looked out on hundreds (fast becoming thousands) of new homes being built on our doorstep.

We have since had a remarkable couple of years – for which we give all the praise, glory and honour to the Lord. Last year I was able to write a very upbeat report, and am in the happy position of being able to do the same again. But before we go any further, I believe the right place to start is to acknowledge that this flourishing has not come out of nowhere – it has grown out of a long process of change and renewal which began many years ago, and most recently through this 'season of sowing', which has quietly directed our steps since 2018, whether in-person, online, or (as we now are) via both.

Our season of sowing has become a season of reaping. There are many manifestations of this, the most important of which are not numeric, rather they are experienced in the loving community which people encounter here at St Mary's. The most noticeable, though, is of course the rapid growth of Sunday attendance. We noted this a year ago, and I am delighted to say that the growth has continued apace in the last year. Our average weekly Sunday attendance over the 6-year period 2014-19 was 48. In Oct-Dec 2022 it was 54; in February 2023 it was 59. Across 2023 as a whole it was 64, in the second half of 2023 it was 68 and in January 2024 it was 74. For the first Sunday in March it was 96!

The loveliest thing about this growth is that it has been natural, organic – we've not 'forced' anything, people have simply come, experienced our collective life here and decided to keep coming. This is much the best way to grow as a church – mission is vital and lies at the heart of Jesus' commission to his body, but it's so much better when it happens (super)naturally! The Lord is bringing people to us – sometimes those are not sure why but sense God drawing them to the church, or who plan to come and the Lord speaks to them directly in a miraculous way – and this represents both a wonderful privilege and a challenge.

The very thing that attracts people most to St Mary's – its close and loving community life – is the very thing which is hardest to maintain as the community grows larger and larger. So, we need to keep providing 'connection points' for people, and also keep alert to the moment when the Lord may call us to send a significantly-sized group to start a new expression of our family. We must beware the twin temptations of complacency and empire-building at all costs. Humble, kind, caring, approachable – these are the values which are drawing people to us, and which we need to hold on to.

I'm also delighted to share that our major initiatives and re-launches of recent times have continued to prosper. At the time of the last Annual Meeting, the Language Class was about to launch a second weekly group – this has thrived and our ministry in this area continues to be a great joy and blessing. My heartfelt thanks to all involved, and especially to Alison for her leadership. Children's Church is also growing, such that it needs to find additional leaders – with thanks to Lianne, Lisa, Gemma, Sharon and all the supportive parents. The occasional women's evenings have been well-supported (with thanks to B, Lisa and Lianne). Oscar and Cristina likewise continue their community building work and are currently rehearsing a play, involving members of the group who have connected with them.

And these ministries all continue alongside those we have offered for many years: our ongoingly popular Thursday coffee morning, Canzonetta choir, our links with St Mary's School, incl. the weekly coffee morning, midweek groups, Monday morning prayer and monthly Quiz Night. We have a certain rhythm to our week, all of which revolves around the building of healthy and loving relationships. Again, as we get larger, we must retain a firm commitment to 'people first' ministry, where the organisation serves the relationships, and not the other way round!

At the Annual Meeting last year, we had discussions centred around three dimensions of church life: Deeper, Closer and Further. It would only be right to look at how we have implemented what came out of those discussions. I list our progress briefly now:

Deeper with God: *Prayers after service* – this has restarted and is offered every week with a team of 8-10 people available to help. *Children's Bibles for church* – actioned April 2023. *Continuing Lent Groups* – we've had the biggest sign-up for Lent groups across the Partnership this year for some years. A new group formed for Lent will continue after Easter. *Courses* – Alpha in the Autumn, with 25 attending (and noting the amazing baptism services held in October and January – both highlights of our year!). *Testimony slot* – running more regularly in Sunday worship, with amazing contributions.

Closer with each other: *Home Groups (need people to lead)* – currently five based at St Mary's, one of which has grown and two of which are new for Lent 2024. *Creating space at the end of church to chat and connect* – numbers of those staying for coffee and chat are larger, and this simple offering of hospitality continues to bear fruit. *Common interest groups – e.g. food.* The women's evenings and World Day of Prayer have all incorporated food as part of the event. There is opportunity to celebrate our rich diversity of cultures more, perhaps, this year? Common interest groups more generally would also be worth exploring. *'This time tomorrow': a focused testimony slot about what people do in their paid work* – one to address. *Free time prayer and praise evening* – one to address, but we have begun discussions.

Further out to the community: *Prayer Walks* – restarted in May and ran through till October. *New estates* – this takes many forms, not least the prayer walks mentioned above. St Mary's School does, of course have a very significant role in reaching people on the new estate in lots of ways. Our weekly school coffee morning has had a more challenging year, but is a great blessing to those who attend – my thanks to Trish and Alise for their faithful leading of this, and also to Trish and Susan as Foundation Governors. We have numerous members and regular attendees from the new estates. We have supported litter picks into the new estates, and welcomed people to the Coronation Tea in May and Remembrance Sunday in November. We advertise our ministries and events regularly on the local community facebook pages. I also have my first assembly at Glebe Farm School this week. There is lots more to do, but plenty happening already. *Cultivating friendships* – so much of what we have shared above relates to this. *Skills audit* – not addressed yet, see below.

The one item which certainly is on my heart as we reflect on all that the Lord is doing, and which feels important to address as a priority, is a 'skills/gifts audit' of our community. With so many new members, there are lots of talents which could be released that we don't know about yet. Watch this space for a 'Skills Sunday' post Easter!

The one fragility of our church life at present remains our finances. My thanks to all who responded generously to the Nov/Dec appeal: if the increase in monthly giving seen at the start of 2024 continues throughout the year, we should break even this year. However, that is currently the best-case scenario (assuming no unexpected repairs), and what we are not in a position to do at present is to budget for further growth. We will review in the summer, and I may run a short teaching series on the biblical principle of tithing. Again, watch this space!

Finally, and always in hope that I don't neglect anyone (and with apologies for only mentioning each person once – some would appear several times!), my heartfelt thanks to: Roger and Jonathan our brilliant churchwardens; to our treasurer Ann Marie; to Ann B, Susan D and Trish as our church stewards (and all the many ways they serve); to Colin & Pam, Ingrid & Jenny, Christine & Brian, Alison & Leslie, Birgitte & Philip G, Philip and Joy D, Melvyn, Lisa & Adrian, Lianne, Gemma, Elizabeth, Susan T, Jo & Phil Y, Tom & Liz, Jen H, Sharon, Lola, Braco, Sally & Roger F, Clare & Jonty, Ann H, Jocelyn, Mike & Sheila A, Oscar & Cristina, Ray, Jo B, Graham & Angela, Children's Church presenters ☺, Susan R, Anthony, Cliff & Rosalind, Margaret, Brenda, Jane, Diana, Cali and Gary; and of course, to Alise, who is at the heart of so much of what we do, and without whom I simply couldn't do what I do... MJT, March 2023