

Rector's Reflection for St. Mary's Annual Church Meeting 31st March 2025

It's been another blessed year for St Mary's – praise God!

I could probably stop there and have said what really needed to be said: the church is flourishing, and the Lord gets all the glory. And if time is short to catch up on all the documents for the Annual Church Meeting – well, you've got the headline!

Digging deeper, in my ACM report last year, I outlined two particular areas for development: first, our finances have struggled – and truthfully, have struggled for a long period, since well before my time here. I'm delighted to report that the past year has seen a significant increase in giving, which has led to a modest surplus in 2024 (our first such year since 2019). The fact that this is driven by consistent congregational generosity, rather than unexpected windfalls or grants, also means that we have a financially sustainable forecast for the first time in decades. My heartfelt thanks to all of you who have donated generously – it has made a *huge* difference.

We can't rest on our laurels, though; we are now covering our basic running costs, which is great news – but if we are to build on the growth we have witnessed, we will likely need to invest in various areas: possibly one or two part-time staff, possibly technological upgrades... There are also changes we will have to make in the near future to, say, our heating system, which is a large gas boiler and has cost huge amounts to run over the last couple of years. To switch to a more environmentally sustainable (electric) system is something we'll have to address in the next 5-10 years, and would be a significant capital project.

Second, I suggested that we should run a 'skills audit' to discover all the latent potential we have in our church family. We did this audit at Harvest last year and it generated a lot of responses, with lots of great offers of help and potential for development. We are blessed with a lot of gifted people! I should apologise to all of you that it's taken me a bit longer to push ahead with the fruit of this audit – but we are now focusing more intentionally on how to turn all your good ideas and kind offers of help into practical outcomes.

This annual meeting will see some of the first fruit of this new focus – I'm delighted that no fewer than six new people will be joining our church council: Lisa, B, Edwin, Cindy, Cristina and Stephen. Tom and Lilibet have also been doing great work with Roger in our churchyard.

The longer-term vision is that we build teams of people focusing on specific areas of our church life: creative, musical, practical, welcome and hospitality, mission, and so on. My hope is that as our newly expanded church council beds in, alongside other key people in our church life, ministry teams will develop, which then allows many more of those gifts and passions we uncovered in our skills audit to find expression.

Stewarding all that the Lord has blessed us with – both financial and especially in terms of people and gifts – remains timely and necessary, as we continue to grow. Average Sunday attendance grew again from 64 in 2023 to 72 in 2024, and has averaged 83 since the beginning of February. It's never about numbers, in and of itself – it's about helping each and every person who comes through our door to experience God's love, and become empowered followers of Jesus, filled with love, hope, peace, joy, faith and purpose. But to do that, we need to be good at encouraging everyone to both receive and contribute, playing their part in the dynamic body of Christ. Growth is both a wonderful blessing and a humbling responsibility.

It's worth re-iterating two reflections I made on our growth last year, as both remain relevant: the first is that this growth is 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 they 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.

Nevertheless, the second reflection is also important: 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. We want to keep that 'family' feel – so, we need to keep providing 'connection points' for people, and also 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.

In my reflecting on church life, two images are guiding me at present. The first I've already referred to: church as family. Calling each other sisters and brothers is not just religious jargon, it's a spiritual reality! But the image of family also has real depth. As someone once quipped: 'you don't choose your family'; and there's a sense in which church is similar, even if we think we've started by 'choosing it'. We join a community, warts and all, and need to rub along together. This has hard bits and sharp edges! It needs grace and patience. But family is also a place where people can be themselves. You come as you are. And St Mary's is very much this kind of place – no airs and graces. As we grow, I still want us to feel like a good family: a bit messy, but very warm and somewhere we can all be at home, ourselves.

The second image is that of the fireplace and the fire. Our 'fire' has grown, for which we give heartfelt thanks and glory to God – but in order for that fire to continue, it needs a bigger fireplace. A fireplace which is too small stifles the fire; too large, and it goes whoosh and then destroys itself; the right size, and the fire burns brightly and sustainably for a long time. We're now a bigger church – and we have to plan accordingly. So, what does 'a bigger fireplace' look like? Well, it's not a bigger building, and it won't be more staff, at least in the short term (maybe in the medium term). It means the sort of simple structures which I've been reflecting on here: a bigger leadership team, who themselves facilitate teams and ministries; a culture where everyone has a part to play; and a clarity about our 'DNA', our core sense of who we are – which I think we do have.

It also means having well thought-through and light-touch organisation – and in this regard we are blessed with many outstanding people who keep everything running. There are so many unsung heroes, but if you'll allow me to mention three: Roger and Jonathan, our brilliant churchwardens and finally Alise, whose contribution is immense, and whom I rely on to keep me going, too!

The only certainty in life is change. In many ways, I hope this season of our life extends for years to come – but the world is changing, our community is changing... it's hard to see too far ahead. God has blessed us, and continues to do so – I am confident that directed by him, we will adapt to whatever the coming year brings. And in the meantime, let's resolve to keep doing all we can to partner with him in the growth of the kingdom here in this place.

Matt, 27th March 2025