

Rather than simply restate what has been going on in the parish this year, I thought it might be appropriate to look back over the past decade as well. Checking the AGM reports over that time, I realise how much has happened and in many ways many things have been accomplished.

Life in the vicarage, for the two of us is wonderful as well as frustrating. There is so much space and the garden is too much for us now. We lost the chickens to the fox last year so the weeds have grown where once the hens pecked the ground to earth. Our children visit rarely - we did have the company of our son for an intensive course of learning to drive and were sorry and a little relieved when he left!

I'm most grateful of course to Catherine for all she does on your behalf in the vicarage. A parish this size and complexity generates big issues of management and that often falls to the vicar, which often means there is little forward planning. Often I miss papers that need attention. As I said in 2009, it would be good to see a part-time parish secretary employed to manage what will become an increasing and inevitable amount of paper work.

The figures for church worship in the church year to Advent Sunday 2019 are as follows: 3630 acts of communion (including home communions) 23 Thanksgivings for the gift of a child, 38 Baptisms (2 adult), 12 Weddings, 38 church funerals and 8 other crematorium services within the parish.

Our regular Sunday congregation is fairly static and I am delighted that we have an active Lay Ministry especially that of Joan Plowman our Reader. There are rotas for reading the lessons, leading the intercessions and administering the chalice and I am grateful to all who have felt able to offer themselves. If anyone wants to be added to these lists please do see me or Joan. The monthly Sunday Evening Eucharist and laying on of hands is well received by a small and loyal group.

In early December, "Love Music Trust" used the building for their termly concert for school children from the local area. There were four School Carol services attended by nearly 2000 - the church at its busiest. I am delighted that we are able to take a small but significant part in these events. The Christmas Eve services attracted even larger numbers of those who like to worship once a year - in excess of 450. As a town civic church we have been called to minister at the Chairman's Inaugural Service and the Armed Forces Day Service. Remembrance Sunday, at the war memorial and afterwards in church, continues, as in the past few years, to attract more and more people. 2018, being the 100th anniversary of the Armistice, a special service of remembrance and thanksgiving was held after the bell-ringers had rung a Peal lasting three and a half hours. Sandbach Boys School held their annual Commemoration Service in October and there were a number of school educational visits to church during the year. Churches Together in Sandbach struggles somewhat, yet continued the series of ecumenical events throughout the year in various locations. The work it does is appreciated by those involved and it keeps the lines of communication open between the various Churches.

I've been encouraged by all the sense of God's call to various and varied ministries apparent in the parish - it is very heartening indeed. As your incumbent I'm supposed to encourage vocations and would urge any others of you who feel called by God to any form of ministry (especially the priestly ministry) not to ignore it! I would encourage you all to spread the word of inv

That is where this church should start to see its fundamental mission of evangelism. Make it your personal calling of mission to bring someone new into the fellowship of the church this year.

The next thing to say is exactly the same as every year – to remind you that I put great store by the "Occasional Offices" and through them we come in contact with several thousand people every year that have nothing directly to do with St Mary's Church. Like most other active Anglican priests, I guess that most of my time is devoted to those who do not come to church. There is a genuine interest in the affairs of the church and love of the building. They may not come, but they still do not instinctively feel it is a total irrelevance and are comforted by its presence. I am touched by the many positive comments we get at Baptisms, Weddings, and Funerals; the warmth and the sincerity of the worship. Here I would pay particular tribute to those who assist at weddings and funerals.

Thanks are due to the work of many others in performing chores working in the background and foreground. The list is not exhaustive but some to thank are: the Wardens and sidesmen and women, the treasurer and auditors and all who keep the finances in order, the PCC secretary, hall-bookings clerk, the cleaners, flower ladies whose work goes on all year round and is most apparent at Easter and Christmas, those who make the refreshments, and cheerfully clear up afterwards, sacristan, organists and choir. To run a parish of such complexity demands a high commitment from many. Thank you all. And before moving on I would like to say a particular thanks to two people., Sheenagh and Anne. Often they have felt stuck between a rock and a hard place. Often they have had to listen and respond to gripes and irritations from people who should know better. They have borne with all that and have been a remarkable pair of churchwardens.

In a sense, even further behind the scene, is the Parochial Church Council who have oversight of all of our parish life, its buildings, its finances and most important its entire mission. They have been kept very busy this last year with a host of new initiatives and requests especially the failed bid for funding for the 4th and final stage of the re-roofing project.

To remind you: I inherited the whole project eleven years ago. The chancel roof had just been completed under Rex Buckley's sagacious leadership. That wiped out the historic financial reserves of the parish. The tower roof and masonry was in a precarious state and with some good funding from English Heritage (EH) was completed as was the third stage of the project the re-roofing of the aisles and main nave roof. That was helped by Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). On each of these occasions the criteria of applying for money changed and on each of the these occasions we, like the funders, were new to the process. Once again the criteria have changed and I wonder whether ever the new National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) will ever be interested in roofing. As the names of the awarding bodies have become bigger the gift for money simply for the fabric has become smaller. It's a pity, as I was hoping to be remembered as the vicar of Sandbach who completed the roofing projects and left a legacy of a historic building water-tight for another 150 years.

As we know there is a constant vigilance about the budget and pressing need to improve general giving. It is a cause for real concern and I make no apology for mentioning them again. Firstly I want to pay an enormous tribute to our Parish Treasurer, the churchwardens who have kept the week by week income streams counted and the Gift Aid officer for their outstanding work this year. At this meeting the Treasurer has again taken us through the

most recent accounts. It is however the story behind the figures upon which I would wish to concentrate. In many respects we are a wealthy parish, and once upon a time there was a decent enough historic reserve. You will by now all know that that has gone. We exist right on the edge of insolvency. We need to work towards a situation where our day to day expenditure is matched by our regular giving. There is no easy way out here, but by a considerable increase in giving.

Ten years ago the message was exactly the same. The diocese asked me to try and do two things as vicar - sort the roof out and get the finances in a better state. I've nearly fulfilled the first and we did a remarkable job of increasing the giving by 60% in 2011. That has now slipped away as new people have not heard the message and the spending value of the pound has diminished in 10 years. Another push to get this message across is to be initiated in May. I recognise appreciatively the sacrificial giving of many and equally am aware that many of you are on fixed incomes and that you face similar increases in the cost of living as does the Church, but would ask you to prayerfully consider if possible increasing your financial support. At the same time we are working hard on strategies to encourage those on the fringe of our fellowship to regularly support their parish church. It is very hard still to get the message across that the £1 coin has considerably less value now than it did when introduced in 1971. To put it in a context, a first class stamp now = 70pence in 2009 = 39p and in 1980 = 12p. In 1971 it was 3p! Still the £1 or less is normative on the collection plate. Please respond with enthusiasm and encourage others to do the same.

I tried in 2009, fruitlessly it seems, to set up a "Friends of St Mary's" to promote the renovation and maintenance of the church building and historic fabric as the responsibility of all the people of Sandbach. We can do our bit as a worshipping community, but our responsibilities are to the maintenance of the Christian ministry in the place. The "Friends" I thought could galvanise the local community to the importance of their historic church building. When in December 2009, English Heritage funds were successfully obtained for the second stage of replacing the entire roof, we had a good local coverage in the press just after Christmas but the response to a general public request for local finance amounted to nothing whatsoever.

As I come to eleven years after my induction as Vicar of Sandbach, I'm acutely aware of the many things that I have failed to do. However I'm also aware that it has been a most fruitful time as well. There is a sense of stability about the place and a willing spirit. I am very conscious of the tremendous amount that has been achieved since 2008 and what the parish might realise in the future. I remain deeply grateful to God for the opportunity of serving Him and his people in this place.

It was my intention when I started my working career as a nurse and a teacher to retire long before my 65 birthday. I'm now nearing my 67th. During the 23 years of church ministry, I never was inclined to be a reforming and innovative vicar. Now that things are in a fairly stable state it will be right for the parish to take stock about its future mission and use the process to look for a young family clergy-person to explore and serve the dynamic opportunities of this town. After all Sandbach is changing fast - it is for St Mary's church as its parish church to respond to these exciting challenges. The Easter Season reminds us that ours is a living faith in a living God. A God who is always doing new things through his Church. A God of surprises who takes us to unexpected and undreamt of places.

Thomas Shepherd April 2019

