

VICAR'S REPORT 2019

Given the incredible, world changing events of 2020, it is hard for us all to cast our minds back to 2019. So much has changed and been disrupted this year, and we are all facing so much uncertainty in every area of our lives right now, that it is taking all we have just to get through the next few weeks and months. 2019 feels like an age ago.

But looking back is both helpful and vital. Remembering the past is important for us as individuals but it's also essential for us as a Christian community. Remembering is exactly that – it is re-mem-bering – it is the mental act of putting things together, of piecing together a narrative that helps us to make sense of the past and move forward with confidence and direction.

Remembering is necessary for every area of life, and it's vital for us as a Church family.

God's at work

Perhaps like many others of you using the Lectio365 prayer app, last week I was currently reflecting on the story of Esther and I was mindful how sometimes it is only possible to see God's work in us after the event.

We didn't know it at the time but as it turns out, 2019 was a time of preparation for us, getting us ready for the pandemic and all the challenges we have been facing. Looking back, it is possible to see how financially, organisationally, and spiritually, it was a time of strengthening, of clarification, and of simplification.

Focus

Having arrived in the previous summer, 2019 was my first full year serving the Church here. While watching and learning about the culture and passion of St Mary's it was important for me **focus on discipleship** - teaching on spiritual disciplines, on the gospel and its power to change lives, on spiritual gifts, and on simplifying our routines and lives to better align ourselves with God's kingdom.

A repeated catch phrase was 'being with Jesus, becoming like Jesus, and doing the things that Jesus did'. Another one was 'making the main thing the main thing'.

Blessing

Financially, as Alastair's report shows, we had another strong year and we can be so grateful that, given the economic impact that the pandemic has had on us all in 2020, our petrol tank was filled up ready for the long journey ahead. Unlike many other organisations, businesses, and charities that we know, we are incredibly fortunate that we have not had to make any staff redundancies and that we can still plan for growth. We are grateful too, for the support of the Government furlough scheme.

Last year, as Lynwen and Tim note in their report, we welcomed some new members onto the staff team and reviewed other's roles as we sought to fulfil our discipleship vision by:

- Strengthening our pastoral care (Kate Capper) and our communications (Kate Emeny),
- Appointing a full time Associate Vicar (Nigel Griffiths) following Helen's departure, to enable us to implement and develop (what I call) our discipleship pathway and leadership pipeline,
- Developing internships and mission to the next generation (Josh Brown)
- Welcoming Erin Gilmore as Curate with her particular mission-oriented gifts.

At the same time, we continued to explore how we could further strengthen and develop our children's and youth work seeking to recruit a Head of Family Discipleship to oversee Martin, Charles and Gen.

Clearer vision

But St Mary's is not a staff team with a Church. We are a Church that happens to have a staff team. Our role, as staff is to enable, encourage, oversee, and support leadership at every level of Church life, as together we long to **see God change lives, families, and Churches again and again.**

2019 was the right time to review and update our mission statement and this is was the outcome:

SEEING GOD CHANGE LIVES, FAMILIES, AND CHURCHES AGAIN, AND AGAIN

There is much to explore and share in all this, and I regret that we haven't been able to spend more time unpacking this in more detail this year, but looking back, I realise now just how important it was to spend time with the core team and the PCC, refining and setting our vision. I am so grateful for the clarity and direction that this has given us, both for the current context we are facing, but also as we look ahead. Again, it seems this was good preparation for what was about to happen.

Facing Change

In my report last year, I talked about change, although I obviously had no idea what was about to hit us. I remarked on what I see happening around me in the Church nationally and internationally - about God's slow reformation of the Church toward discipleship and disciple-making, about a shift outwards into mission and evangelism, about the intentional shifts towards growing younger, wider and deeper.

Here is a quote for last time

*I am increasingly drawn to the idea that we are at the beginning, not of a dramatic revival, but of a new slow and sometimes painful **reformation of the Church**. Not a rapid change to the way things are but a slow and steady shift in the narrative about Church, and about Christ, based around a renewed focus on the gospel of the Kingdom, the call to repentance and faith and the invitation to whole-life discipleship.*

Reading this again, I am struck that I was already anticipating this as a time of change not knowing that in March this year, everything would stop and overnight we would have to rethink how to do everything all over again.

It has been said that the pandemic has accelerated change in every sphere of our lives. This includes the Church and I sense that it's only hastened the reformation that was already underway.

A time of preparation

So, as I look back, I am glad that in 2019 we laid the foundations for the major themes that are needed right now:

- Prioritising **personal discipleship** – taking ownership for our own growth in faith and maturing as one of Jesus' disciples
- **Exploring disciplines** of silence, solitude, simplicity, rest and sabbath – stepping back from action into contemplation and union with God
- Seeking to grow in our use of **Spiritual gifts** – creating space for the Spirit to move among us
- Revisiting the content of **the Gospel** – being called into allegiance, with Jesus as our King
- Reflecting on our **connection with our neighbours** – actively looking for ways to reach out to them and pray for them seeking transformation

A culture shift

Very quickly on my arrival, I noticed that St Mary's has a culture of activity. The new centre that God had enabled us to build together, bustled with life and energy. My diary, the Church diary, was always full.

I noticed too, that Reigate, shares this culture. Busyness and feeling time-poor seems so normal to so many.

While we can all be so grateful for the vital ways so many people serve in Church life, it is important that 'whatever we do, whether in word or deed, we do it in the name of the Lord Jesus' (Col 3:17). In other words, our activity needs to be Jesus-directed and God-connected, not just good. We need to do *everything* 'in his name', for his honour.

As 2019 came to an end, and not knowing what lay ahead, feeling God was trying to say something important to us, I began to speak about entering a time of 'simplification' – the idea of intentionally giving ourselves a chance to step back from activity in order to recalibrate our lives, and make sure that all that we were doing, whether in word or deed, was being done 'in the name of our Lord Jesus' – directed and owned by him.

And so, as I planned for 2020, I had in mind that we would not only explore this in small groups, or through Sunday teaching, but that we would pause a few of our activities, to give us space to check ourselves, to pray, and to reset the dial before setting off again. And then the virus came...

Summarising it all

So, as I look back, what do I feel or think? What do I sense that God was doing among us?

I think 2019 was a year of **preparation**.

And I think that 2020 is a time of **transition**.

A new and different future lies ahead in 2021. It won't be a rerun of the past, or a return to normal. It will be new.

Like a tall ship, having been repainted, renewed, and reordered, in the safety of the harbour, we are being prepared for a new journey together. God is using this time to get us ready for the next chapter in our lives, equipping, repositioning, training us up for a **new adventure**.

Once again, I am so grateful to all of you as together, we serve God here in this place. Church is a people thing and you all matter. Thank you for your grace this year as we seek to overcome the challenges, we all face.

As always, I am indebted to so many, to our staff team, to the amazing warden team – to Tim, and Lynwen, Jeremy and Nick – but most especially to Tory. As I have already mentioned, this year, this season, has been hard for me in so many ways, and her love, support, encouragement, reflection, humour, and grace, has carried me through. I am so grateful to you, my dear love.

May God bless us richly, as a whole family together, as we continue to give ourselves away for the sake of others, and his kingdom, and may we experience the joy of seeing hundreds join us in making Jesus their King.

Richard

28th September 2020