

Sunnyside APCM 2023

Give Thanks

I know that APCM's are not everyone's favourite event of the year, but I think they are a wonderful opportunity. Yes, there is some formal business we need to do so that we can ensure that we are properly constituted as an organization, but for me the annual meeting is essentially an opportunity to look back and give thanks for what God has done in the past year and look forward to what we think he might be going to do in the year ahead and that is exciting. Although there have been lots of challenges, we also have much to be grateful for from 2022 which is the focus of this meeting.

Psalm of thanks

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His love endures for ever. (Psalm 136.1)

My thanks

We have a huge amount to be thankful for at Sunnyside. As we have seen already in the annual reports and our psalm of praise, God has been very gracious to us and shown us his goodness in many ways. I have much to be thankful for too. I continue to be thankful that God has called me to serve as your Vicar. I am thankful for the support and the care you show for me in so many ways. I am thankful for all that you do to ensure that Sunnyside runs so well and enable us to shine as God's light in this place. I am thankful for the ways in which I see God at work in your individual lives and in our communal life as we seek to follow him and serve our community.

I am not going to try to thank lots of people by name as I would need to name all of you because you all contribute in different ways and it would be awful if I missed someone out, but I do want to take this opportunity to thank Jane, John and Marguerite who are stepping down from the PCC. We are hugely grateful to them for their willingness to have served Sunnyside in these roles, for their time and their wisdom. I would also publicly like to thank Tim for his amazing work improving and running our technology and to Mel for all that she does so graciously to keep things running so efficiently. Thank you!

I am also extremely thankful to be able to announce that Sarah and Stephen will be joining us after half term. Sarah will be our fulltime families and young people leader and Stephen will be our parttime worship leader. More information about them soon, but do pray for them and their children as they move to Berkhamsted.

Vicar's report: Looking forward

I wonder how you are feeling about church today. I wonder how you are feeling about Sunnyside at the moment. Perhaps you are really excited about how God is at work in our

midst; or maybe you are discouraged by our size or the apparent lack of engagement by those around you; probably it is a mix of feelings. Some of how you answer these questions will be down to your personality: are you a glass half full or half empty sort of person; some will reflect your experience of the past few years with the huge challenges of the pandemic and now the cost of living crisis on top of personal mountains you are climbing; some will have their view coloured by the aspects of church life that you see and what you think is important for a church to be and do.

We have much to be thankful for at Sunnyside as we have heard, but there are also things that should give pause for thought. Like churches across the country, our Sunday attendance is down on pre-Covid levels, particularly at the Ten Thirty which can be disheartening for those who come; and the pool of people who are willing and able to serve is undoubtedly smaller than it has been in the past which puts more pressure on the few as we seek to continue the services and activities which we believe that we are called to offer. This has been exacerbated by the staff vacancies, but we need to be honest: new staff will not in and of themselves solve the problems of small teams; Sarah and Stephen will bless us in many ways I am sure, but their arrival does not mean we can all put our feet up.

The reasons for the situation in which we find ourselves are varied and there is no easy fix. We need to be honest about the realities, but also to recognize that the picture is complex. Yes, Average Sunday Attendance figures are down, but the numbers of people engaging with Sunnyside have grown over the past year. Some folk have left and some are no longer able to get to church on Sunday, but new people have joined us, and pastoral visits and home communions mean that the housebound continue to be part of Sunnyside. We may miss those we no longer see regularly on Sundays, but those who are part of Messy Babies, the new families at Messy Church and the young people finding a home at Friday Youth Club are all part of the wider Sunnyside family. I would like at this point to say a particular thank you to Esther Stewart for all she has done to enable us to continue to serve our children and young people during the staff vacancies, and Penny Wager and the amazing team for faithfully running Messy Babies. Without them these important ministries would struggle even if we had staff.

Growth in relation to churches is tricky to measure. Numbers are just one indicator and whilst important is far from the whole story. Numbers in church on Sunday or at Messy Babies on Monday are facts but say very little about growth as followers of Jesus or the depth of relationships with God and one another. Numbers alone cannot tell us how we are doing in fulfilling our purpose as Christ's Church in this place.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul wrote that God's:

intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3.10-11)

In other words, the Church is how God chooses to make known the wisdom of his brilliant plan to redeem the world, that restoration plan which we have been thinking about through our sermon series exploring *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and our celebrations of Christ's death and resurrection at Easter. The Church, that is the gathering of all God's people not buildings, exists to help other people understand who God is and their need of him; it is there to show that it is God's world, whatever things might look like. That was and is God's plan. That was and is what Sunnyside is here to do. That is why our vision is to be known as a Christ-centred community of living faith which seeks to make Jesus known to others. That is why we have been working on the PCC's priorities to grow as worshipping people in church and in life; to grow as followers of Jesus in who we are and what we do; and to share Jesus with people through relationships. These are the vision and priorities I spoke about at last year's annual meetings and at various times since.

When the PCC met for its awayday earlier this year, we reviewed our vision and priorities and felt that they were still the right ones for us. It is important for us to have a good strategy as it gives us focus and direction. It is encouraging to see progress in goals such as streamlining our technology for services to make it more efficient, running Alpha which started last night, and moving forwards in our desire to be good disciples by caring for God's world better through our Eco Church initiatives like the bike racks and *no mow May* in our church grounds. However, on its own, this strategy (or any other) is not enough to bring us growth in spirit and in number. Sunnyside is not just an organization, it is the body of Christ in this place and he is the head. It is a body that will find life through recognizing that it is Jesus who is Lord and nothing else. It is a body that will find power through the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in us and through us as individuals and a community. It is a body that will flourish if its relationships are right. It is the body in which we all have our part to play. A part that will enable us to grow as followers of Jesus and to share his love more effectively with those around us.

During Lent I read a book by Bishop Emma Ineson; it is called *Failure: what Jesus said about sin, mistakes and messing things up*. As you can imagine, the publishers were not thrilled about the title, but it was excellent and really encouraging. In it she argues that church is best thought of not as a noun or a verb but as an adjective, a describing word:

'I believe that we need to focus less on what we are, and the limits and boundaries of that, less on what we do, and the way our own efforts might save us, and more on the way we are together, the quality of our being and our relating – *how we are church*.'

In the days of the early Church, it was the way people were together, caring for one another regardless of age or social status that was the strongest witness to those around them. It was the distinctive way in which they were community that was in large part responsible for the transformation of the obscure Jesus Movement to the dominant religious force in the Western World within a few hundred years. This was of course the work of the Holy Spirit, but the truth of the Gospel they declared was seen in the way the people loved one another just as Jesus had said it would.

The depth and in many cases longevity of the relationships at Sunnyside are a precious thing. They are rooted and grounded in love and prayer and I give thanks for them. That sense of community was one of the things we missed most during lockdown. Those relationships are part of what makes us a family and attracts others to Sunnyside. *The Listening Project* and other research has shown that isolation and longing for community are widespread in our society. That very human need for relationships is one of the many ways in which God shows his wisdom by giving us the Church. It means that *how* we love and *how* we serve are critical if we are to grow as we hope and pray we will.

Conclusion

So as we move into this new year with all the blessings and challenges it will bring; with all the opportunities for growth in our relationships with God, with one another and with our wider community that it will offer, let's remember that church is not just a noun (a thing that exists) nor is it just a verb (a thing that does), church is an adjective (a describing word) and the *how* is vital if we are to be salt and light in this place. Let's follow Bishop Emma's advice and focus less on what we are and what we do and more on the way we are together.

With this in mind, my prayers for the coming months continue to be about *how* we do church together as well as about *what* we are doing. I will be praying that *how* we worship will glorify God. I will be praying that *how* we grow in our relationships with Jesus will enable us to experience more of the fullness of life which he promises. I will be praying that *how* we love and serve others will enable them to experience something of God's love for them so that they too would choose to be part of what God is doing in this place.

This *how* in many ways underlies Paul's prayer to the church in Philippi which I have been praying for us ever since I was appointed:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1.9-11

So let's think about how we are Church so that we might reveal more of God's wisdom through our life together and have even more reasons to give thanks to him for:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.
His love endures for ever. (Psalm 136.1)