

Pastoral letter January 2020



Dear Church family,

At the beginning of this year, and a new decade it is good to look back to what God has been doing across our congregations and also to look forward in anticipation of all that lies ahead. There is much to be thankful for! Just as spring follows winter and there are signs of new life in our gardens and green spaces, we see signs of movement and growth as a church. *Aslan is on the move!*

2019 had plenty going on! Eight weddings, nineteen funerals and ten christenings are the mix of life occasions that often bring the stranger across the door of a church; we served many in the community and beyond in times of great celebration or heartache to be more fully God's people for the good of our community in word and indeed! Other highlights for me are the visitors that we welcomed over Easter and Christmas; seeds that were planted last year have borne fruit, some who came to church for the first time in many years last year have been in church regularly week by week in 2019 growing in their faith and love for Jesus. For me personally it was deeply moving to have family members who are not normally in church in the front row at Carols by Candlelight two years running – we pray on, faithfully 'do the stuff' and trust God for the outcome! All of this is part of our loving God, growing family and increasing hope!

Over the ten days leading up to Christmas we hosted sixteen congregational gatherings and had a total of 2,335 guests through the doors. Our giving throughout all of the Christmas services is going to our Community Compassion Fund and I am thankful to record a total of £927.62 was raised across some of those congregations. This fund is open to anyone in the geographic parish with the full details of how this to be administrated at the end of the month, following our PCC mtg. We want to be increasingly known for our generous compassion and Holy Spirit inspired presence in our communities: *everyday, everywhere with everyone!*

Lent 2019 saw the introduction of thankfulness jars and brightly coloured post it notes used week by week on Sundays to thank God for His many blessings to us. Seeing the jars bought into church, hearing the stories of families talking together at meal times about reasons to be thankful was inspiring! We look forward to growing in joy in 2020 in our series in Philippians and, as we prepare for Lent together, may we continue to practice thankfulness on a daily basis knowing that despite the challenges we often face God is good, all the time and, all the time, God is good!

We have had our fair share of hello's and goodbyes in 2019 with births, marriages and sadly the deaths of Winnie and Doreen in particular. Just as folk have joined the church family, so others have felt the time was right to move on and we pray Gods blessing on them all. There are some ministry leadership changes – Maggie has stepped back from leading life group ministry after a number of years and this now returns to me for the interim; Lyn, Karen and Julie have taken on the role of Hospitality Co-ordinators. There are a number of people joining in ministry leadership. Steve Ball stepped down from leading worship after 19 years and this mantle has now passed to Adam, though still being very much involved in the worship culture here with us. Lorna stepped down from Tinkers after 20 years and Emma-Jane will take responsibility for taking this forward with Louise, Angela and Julie as part of the team. Maggie and Ian and others will be leading new Life groups this spring, with more needed as there is a real hunger and desire to grow in community, depth and life in the Lord! I continue to be grateful for those who have faithfully served and ended well and for those who have responded to the call to 'step up'. *Can I ask what your part in church life will be this year? What might God be saying to you about ways in which you can serve Him and the church family in 2020?* There are gaps in teams and ministry opportunities so gladly book in and have a cuppa with your vicar to talk about how you might give of your time, talents and treasure! As is coming through repeatedly, lovingly and strongly across church life over the last number of months, in the traffic lights picture: *in what way is God asking you to Stop! Listen! And Obey!?* *I'd love to have a conversation with you about it and support you taking those three steps outside of your comfort zone!?*

The staff team increased in September with the arrival of Emma-Jane as Children and Youth Ministry Leader, Adam, our Pastoral Apprentice with emphasis on worship, children and youth and wider ministry and Angela, Ian and Julie volunteering in different areas of church life. Staff team meetings now see seven of us at The Vicarage on Monday mornings between 0915 and 11am – do pray for us as we seek to serve you and the community well!

‘Renew and refresh’, ‘healthy leaders, healthy teams’ and ‘Stop! Listen! Obey!’ have been key themes this year. We have begun the renew and refresh of the old church building with new chairs, new windows, new heaters, decorated back hall and youth and children’s rooms and with more on the horizon in 2020 in new rooms, heating systems and flooring. Ministry teams across church life now have terms of reference and a clear sense of purpose and vision; new leaders are stepping forward. Our prayer life, those times when we can stop and listen is growing as a church – Wednesdays at 7am see up to twenty of us gather to pray in what are really blessed times, and alternate Wednesdays at 8am see another small group gather to pray the prodigals (and the not-yet’s) home. ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ saw us meet for a second year running morning and evening to pray for our community in response to specific requests for prayer. It is humbling to be trusted in this way and we cry ‘more Lord’ in 2020! Ian and Angela will lead years ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ in May; how might you join in this prayer journey and discovery this year?

NEXT DOOR HEXTABLE

Most of us are very much aware that the Annexe development began as an aspiration some years ago and is becoming more and more clear as a vision and reality. Funding challenges have always been real for this visionary project that exists now as ‘Next Door Hextable.’ This will serve as a community hub and café space that will nurture creativity, offer hospitality and deepen community. The challenge of completing the annex is ever before us as we start this new year. The completion of Next Door Hextable remains a priority for the PCC; faith, favour and finance are key themes in our prayers and discussions together. *‘The harder it gets, the more God will get the glory’ is the truth we hold firm to!*

In May the PCC agreed a reordering of our present church spaces to include a new entrance area into the lounge, two smaller spaces created from the old entrance area, a refresh of the old building and the establishment of an industrial kitchen to serve in our lounge and church space. We agreed it was imperative to get started, however inadequately to enable better use of the space we already have. In addition, we recognised that completing the external works in order for the decaying hoarding to come down was key and that this work would likely cost £180k. Many of you pledged £156k additional monies following my appeal. I am grateful for the sacrificial generosity that makes commencing this work possible. Faith and finance coming together! ‘Favour’ came in discussions with HPC and the pledge to enable much of the key groundworks in their Spring 2020 budget, as part of the refresh of the crossroads junction here in our village. There is a shared commitment for the hoardings to be down and the external landscaping finished ideally before VE day celebrations on 8th May 2020. *Tenders will follow for this revised scheme, following the redesigned access works near to the traffic lights at McColls which will greatly enhance the overall scheme, and make accessibility and connections for ourselves more and more of a reality!*

Recognising the increasing demands on me of specialist fundraising and project managing alongside a busy parish, the PCC agreed to commission a fundraiser in September on a no win - no fee basis. He was appointed and has regular contact with me updating on progress made. Andrew’s initial optimism about achieving a positive outcome via grants and legacies and not loans by repositioning the project has sadly not borne fruit. The history of the project remains a stumbling block. In November he was preparing to approach 108 funds on our behalf; 23 of them were funds that we have been previously rejected by. I have fortnightly updates, and do pray for him as these approaches are continuing to be made. *Favour and finance, Lord; grow our faith!*

The PCC have, in addition prayerfully considered the option of further loans including another finance organization who have been ‘tremendously amenable’ to granting us a loan which would be more cost effective than from our own Diocese. Their offer of a loan remains. In addition, there is a further potential loan from the diocese but this will only be drawn down once we know the outcome of the fundraising and ongoing details. *Again, we will seek to update more regularly as momentum grows throughout 2020.*

So, in summary...

- Prayers for favour & finance in the way we honour God in the completion of the annexe.
- If you have pledge monies from 2019 that are yet to be paid, might you action this direct to the Building Fund – Sort: 20-25-42 Acc: 73932516 and update Sue on this, at office@stph.org.uk
- Favour as we seek grant monies of at least £100K
- Partnership and community working with Hextable Parish Council circa £50k.
- Ideally borrowing no more than £250K remaining loan monies over 8, 12 or 15 years to enable the project to be completed sustainably.
- Completion on the groundworks, asap with quotes being sourced now, link work with HPC for the completion of this with other wider works at the crossroads so that the external hoardings can be taken down.
- Progress in the remaining finance and favour challenges.
- Pray on for Andrew our fundraising lead and our fortnightly updates on progress.
- Pray on for your vicar as I dedicate ten hours each week to this amidst the many wider demands of parish life and ministry.
- In all things knowing God's honour every step of the way.

And so to look ahead...

In my preparation for monthly PCC meetings I reflect on the encouragements, challenges and goals of church life, my 'ECG' of ministry if you like. Finishing the Annexe is ever before us – faith, favour and finance are key in seeing Next Door Hextable open for the flourishing of the community and the wider health and growth of Gods kingdom here in Hextable & Swanley Village... *More Word, More Spirit, More Care and More Contact!*

Like we found in Luke 5 in our Epiphany Sunday time spent with Simon Peter, we want our obedience to be true: 'just whatever He asks and we will do....'

we say this to Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit for all that 2020 holds...

Yours with a glad and trusting heart,



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