

Annual Report for 2019

Chapter 1: Children & Young People's Ministry

Tots' Praise

Revd Natasha Brady

We meet every Monday in term time and the atmosphere has a lovely **buzz** about it. The format of the session sees the children playing with the range of toys that are set out by our lovely volunteers each week. Parents, carers and grandparents are welcomed and offered refreshments, as are the children. Near the end, I shout *'tidy up time'* and then once the



toys are away we settle down for nursery rhymes and play musical instruments. Our team of volunteers changed over the course of the year. Sadly we grieved the death of one of our most vibrant helpers - Susanne McDonald to cancer, and we celebrated the return to health of another, Cath Smith.

Tot's Praise, in 2019, seemed to be a year of two halves. By the end of the academic year, i.e. the summer holidays - numbers were soaring and we had created a WhatsApp group so parents/carers could continue to meet up during the long break. This was a welcome piece of work, that deepened their relationship with the Church and one another, which was brilliant. In the Autumn, numbers dropped a bit, and haven't really bounced back yet. It's not bad - just disappointing. We had over 25 adults & 40 plus toddlers, every week, by the summer. September to December saw those numbers fall off to about 15 - 18 adults and 20-25 children.

As the year progressed we marked each Christian festival with suitable activities and a great deal of fun and excitement. We devised an Easter egg hunt, summer party and again celebrated with a Christmas party. Great opportunities to witness to the love of God and the fellowship we offer in the name of Jesus Christ. By meeting the families where they are in their journey of faith we are having more and more conversations about God and what he means to us. This relational approach to evangelism is beginning to make significant changes in our relationships with some people. For that I am thankful. But we and I need to remind ourselves this is a 'fringe' ministry, so we cannot expect folk to leap from no church to regular Sunday attendance by this means of community engagement alone.

We continue to need your prayer in regards to being open, confident witnesses of the gospel. I long to be able to share a weekly bible story and sing Christian songs with this group but they are so fearful, which is a shame, but our volunteers are now happily chatting to all who come.

On a positive note, by being God's hands and feet - leading Faith-fuelled lives seems to have led two childminders into being willing helpers. They set up Tots Praise each week, and share their ideas willingly, which has been a blessing. One of our St Andrew's congregation, now comes, regularly, to pack down and help at Christmas. It has been humbling to see the generosity of all those who give of their talents each week to keep this ministry alive. To them I want to say a heartfelt -

THANK YOU ❤️

Junior Church

Janet Cottrell

KiC (Kids in Christ) is the Junior Church group for primary aged children (5-11 years). KiC leaders Nicky, Janet, Karen and Tara ran the group on a rota basis in 2019 with the help each week of an adult volunteer and occasionally assisted by the 7-UP teenagers. The teaching material used was from CLICK, which is based on the Kids@church programme from CEP Australia. The theme for the week was brought to life through a variety of games, crafts, drama, discussion and prayer, relating the Biblical teaching of the session to the children's everyday lives.

In the first half of 2019 we explored "Living in God's Family"; Jesus' teaching from Matthew. Weekly topics covered Anger and Making Peace, Don't Worry, Love for Others, Being Humble, Forgiving Others and Prayer – God Hears His Children.

The second half of 2019 examined some of the Giants of Faith in God's Big Plan, people such as Noah, Abraham, Rahab, Moses, Gideon, Deborah and Samson. Each

week there were activity or colouring sheets based on the week's lesson for the children to take home to remind them of the things discussed during the session.

We would like to thank our leaders in 2019 for all their planning and patience. Tara "moved up" with her teenagers to become a leader in 7Up. We have about 7 families who attend occasionally or regularly and we would love to see this grow so that there is a bit more interaction and opportunity for games. We managed without a crèche during 2019 as we have had no babies in church for a while.

We closed the year with a lovely Christmas song – the children were rehearsed and accompanied by Deborah Wetherall.

7Up

Simon Edwards

In 7Up we provide a safe space for our young people (teens) to connect and build relationships with each other and with God. We welcome visiting young people who choose to join us; friends of 7Up members, visiting relations of church members etc.

Enjoying fun and food (particularly Biscoff spread!) are key ingredients of our times together. We are also real with each other, supporting one another, in friendship and in prayer, to face and overcome life's challenges.

In 2019 we supported the MacDonald family, and each other, through Susanne's brave battle with cancer and her tragic passing in November.

We are truly grateful for the joy and vitality which Susanne brought to our 7Up community. Her unwavering confidence in her saviour, Jesus, and in her loving Father in heaven, will continue to inspire us.



Developing personal prayer lives, reviewing a range of faith-building resources, and exploring how to be fruitful followers of Jesus, influencing others for good, have all featured in our 2019 sessions.

We encourage our young people to shape our sessions and to lead as they feel equipped. Our two senior members, Joni MacDonald and Lizzie Cottrell, have contributed to the planning and leading of 7Up sessions, and they treated us to a Treasure Hunt in the Vicarage Garden in the summer. It has been a privilege to work with these young women to develop their leadership gifts.

This is what some of our young people and a parent have to say about 7Up:
'I joined 7Up because I wanted to experience Christianity in a small group, where I felt comfortable. I tried to join one at school but I didn't enjoy it. I have enjoyed exploring my faith in a community.'



'I really like the creative activities.'

'I like the variety of 7Up. The final game links everything together from that session – very helpful.'

'Praying together seems more powerful in a group than by myself, and more specific and personal than in the main service'

'It's great that there is a small group setting where my son feels at home discussing spiritual and personal issues.'

Being able to develop the right words and

reactions through challenges, traumas and successes is so valuable and shows that we are all different when it comes to relying on our faith. Having adult leaders who are fun and generous in their expression of faith is one of the best things about our church.'

Lighthouse

John Wheatley

Once again in 2019 volunteers from our church and Children attended a Lighthouse Holiday Club. This year a new Lighthouse started in Langley which meant that many Children from

our Churches and local area had a choice of Club and week to attend

Lighthouse is a holiday club for children, run by Christians from local churches and others working together, bringing churches and communities together

This years Lighthouses saw growing attendance at both Burnham and Langley and the number of volunteer Teenagers reaching a new high. All volunteers attend a



child safeguarding course, many are allocated roles that are unfamiliar to them (ask Natasha and Jamie) but have an amazing enthusiasm and find they have abilities they never knew they had.

A typical day will see Children arrive and be registered at 10.00am they will break into their own age groups in the Main tent//Stage for a half hour assembly which features worship, testimonies, games, noise and a lot of fun. After this each Age group will follow a timetable which features sports, crafts games Christian teaching and lots of time to make friends. They at all times are looked after by Age group leaders Lighthouse keepers and Lamplighters. The day ends with a session in the main Tent/Stage featuring Worship games fun and rounding off with THE GUNGE TANK. Noise levels generated as they try to get their favourite helper gunged are beyond belief. When we talk to parents the following day they always seem amazed at how quickly their children fall asleep.

Across the local region 5000 Children attended a Lighthouse on a daily basis in addition to 3500 Teenagers and Volunteers from all communities.

Many people describe Lighthouse as 'the best week of the summer holidays!'

Safeguarding

Revd Natasha Brady

Stoke Poges Church continues to take safeguarding very seriously. Our safeguarding policy was

reviewed and updated and approved by the PCC at the April PCC meeting. It is on display in the St Andrew's Centre and on St Giles' noticeboard.



This year there was a change to who should undertake the Basic safeguarding course, which meant all our sides-people and the choir were required to undertake the training. Both ministries embraced this wholeheartedly and we had Rowena Griffiths come and deliver the training to us on behalf of the Oxford Diocese. So we are fully compliant in all our ministries now, which is a wonderful achievement.

We will continue with our safer recruitment policy, as stipulated by the Church of England. To ensure that we have capacity to do that, two more people became accredited with the Leadership qualifications in safeguarding and recruitment to assist me when taking on new people, whether they are paid or volunteers. I hope, as a church community, you understand the vital nature of safeguarding. We must be a community that looks out for the vulnerable, both children and adults, therefore if you are stepping into a new role within the life of the church, do not be surprised to learn that safeguarding training and checks are part of that recruitment process.

Our annual Safeguarding Audit showed a few holes but they are now plugged and all those who need to renew their training have been contacted, as our certificates only last 3 years. Natasha will continue to monitor their progress as the Interim Safeguarding Officer. Anyone requiring a new DBS should continue to contact Margriet Wells, as she deals with this area of Safeguarding.

Our hope is that everyone will feel enabled and safe within our Church and, when necessary, confident to share any concerns that they have, knowing that we all have ears to hear and the heart of Jesus to act appropriately to all.

Key message from the Oxford Diocese:

- The welfare of the child, young person and vulnerable adult is at all times paramount and takes precedence over all other considerations.
- The Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser must be consulted whenever a safeguarding concern of any kind arises in your parish.
- Safeguarding is part of our core faith and an integral feature of Christian life in our parish churches.

Chapter 2: Getting Involved

The Coffee Shop

Tina Edwards & Margriet Wells

The Coffee Shop

at St Andrew's, Rogers Lane

For us, 2019 continued to demonstrate the enthusiasm of our customers in supporting all our charity fundraising projects. Below are the top three charities for which you have helped raise money. Thank you!

£880 to Alexander Devine Children's Hospice - via sale of knitting items, including those sold through Pinewood Nursery.

£330 to Care International in support of Margriet & Charlotte Wells' sponsored charity cycle through Vietnam. We also sold cakes and bakes.

£150 to Swan Sanctuary based in Datchet, through the sale of jams and marmalades... lots and lots of jams and marmalades.

Nepal Leprosy Trust (NLT)

Each year we set aside 10% of our profit to sponsor a child. In 2019 we have started a 3 year plan to sponsor a child, this time through NLT. We are sponsoring Adika Ramtel who is 5 years old, one of five girls in her family. Adika's parents are people affected by leprosy. They are from a very remote part of the country, Bajura, but at present they have settled in a leprosy colony in Kathmandu. With no income there is no money for schooling. Even though the coffee shop has paused for a while, we will remain committed to supporting Adika and have enough money set aside to do so.

Saying no to plastics where we can...

In a continuing effort to reduce our use of plastic we started buying our milk from Pinewood Nursery's refill pantry, collecting it in glass bottles each week.

They began selling some of our knitted items in their shop and we have taken one or two special requests.

Cakes and Bakes

We are still enjoying Bellaroo Bakes. Started by a local entrepreneur Beth, Bellaroo Bakes make special occasion cakes. But this will be on hold in 2020 as Beth is expecting a baby and we wish her, her husband and the new baby well.

Volunteers

Although we had been advertising and searching for new volunteers throughout 2019 we have not been successful. We also lost some of our current volunteers due to ill health or caring duties.

Can we thank everyone who has worked or visited The Coffee Shop in 2019.

Knit and Natter

Alison Wheatley

This year we carried on with lots of projects. We made flannel rabbits, knitted chicks and Bernard Bears. We made lots of Dash Bags for both Children and Adults at different times of the year (which were loaded with masses of donations from everyone at the Church). We knitted cakes and sandwiches as a display for the Horticultural Show.

In the autumn the Knit and Natter group began making giant poppies to be used by the flag pole, near the statue of the dog and returning soldier. They also ran a workshop in October for villagers to come and create a giant poppy or two for the fence. This was a great success and very well supported. Over 200 poppies were made and displayed.

For Christmas, we created Chocolate Orange Snowmen and Christmas puddings and rounded off the year by making Angels, which had adventures around the village during advent. Many of these projects helped in raising Funds for Alexander Divine to a total of £870.00. We were able to involve many in the local community, and had a lot of fun. We would like to thank Pinewood Nurseries for their assistance in our fundraising.



Stoke Poges Men's Group

Nigel Lowe

2019 was another good year for the Men's Group with our usual mix of Curry Nights, Breakfasts and our Annual Dinner all with inspiring speakers. And not forgetting the Lads, Dads and Grandads Skittles evening, with a fish and chip supper, when once again the Lads showed the so called adults that it's not just about how hard you bowl!

Looking to the future, we are planning our future events. Which we hope will include a visit to a local brewery!

More information is available on the church website:

<http://www.stokepogeschurch.org/men> and you can join us on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/spmg2013>

Reapers

Mike Wright

We have managed to keep St. Giles Churchyard under control for yet another year.

I personally have been involved for almost 50 years, and I was the youth policy! We are struggling to maintain the nicely manicured look of St.Giles' Churchyard but luckily we have had an injection of a couple of younger Reapers (Simon and family, Jonathan and Kate), which has made such a difference and it looks great after the Reapers have put in a good shift.

We meet on alternate Saturdays during growing season from 9am to about 11 (which includes a tea and doughnut break!!). We are a pretty laid back, but very dedicated, bunch. We cut the grass, strim around the gravestones and prune the roses, but anything else requires an appeal for extra help one as one-off work parties. Our season ends with leaf clearing.

I need to mention the standard roses. They have suffered from drought in recent times and quite a few have died. We are looking at the best way forward to re-establish the former glory of the approach to St.Giles'.

In the past we also maintained the grounds at St. Andrews. Now Ann, our caretaker, does a really great job. We owe a big thank you to Ann and her family.

I would like to thank all the Reapers for their support and hard work throughout the year.

Bell Ringers

Anne Frank, Tower Captain

We recruited a new ringer this year, which brings the number of members up to 11. Teaching a new person is very time-consuming and also quite scary - Ralph is the only one of us brave enough to do it! Judy has learnt very quickly - she is not quite ready for weddings, but it won't be long.

We have managed to ring before most Evensongs on Sundays and have rung for several weddings, with more coming up this year. We have improved our communications with Richard to ensure we get the wedding times right! We also rang at Christmas, Remembrance Day and various other occasions during the year. Our Wednesday practices continue - we try to learn new methods, but it's a challenge as we are all relative new-comers to ringing. But the evenings are enjoyable - we are an amiable bunch and welcome anyone to come along and try us out.

The tower continues to be popular with visiting ringers. The money raised from visitors' peals is returned to the church for large expenses in the tower, though luckily, we haven't needed to call on this resource recently.

Chapter 3: Behind the Scenes

PCC Activities

Secretary's Report

Simon McDowell, Churchwarden and Acting PCC Secretary

During 2019, the PCC consisted of four elected members, two elected representatives of the Deanery Synod, two churchwardens and one licenced minister. The Secretary and Treasurer are appointed by the PCC. Since the last APCM, the PCC has met five times in a formal setting and once where we focus on wider spiritual matters and developing our church community.

Our PCC has two active working committees:

- the Standing and Finance committee, comprising the Vicar, Churchwardens and Treasurer with other PCC members attending as needed. It meets as required in between formal PCC meetings to address more urgent needs where a resolution is required; and
- the Property Committee, which is responsible to the PCC for the upkeep of the fabric of both church buildings. It consists of PCC members plus church members who are experts in property matters and whose help is much appreciated.

During 2019, the PCC were focused on community engagement, safeguarding, and maintenance of the church estate. We had a successful planning application for new flats above the main section of the St Andrew's buildings and are now beginning to plan for tenders and work scheduling, hopefully to begin in late 2020. St Giles' had its Quinquennial inspection, which showed that the significant restorations in 2015-17 had solved all the long term problems.

The reports of the other activities that take place in our church community, both at St Andrew's and St Giles', can be found elsewhere in this blog. The PCC is very grateful to all the leaders and their helpers who give up their time to make these activities happen.

Also on the website are a summary the annual accounts, which reflect the financial state of the Stoke Poges Church. The Treasurer's report will describe what's happened financially in a separate section.

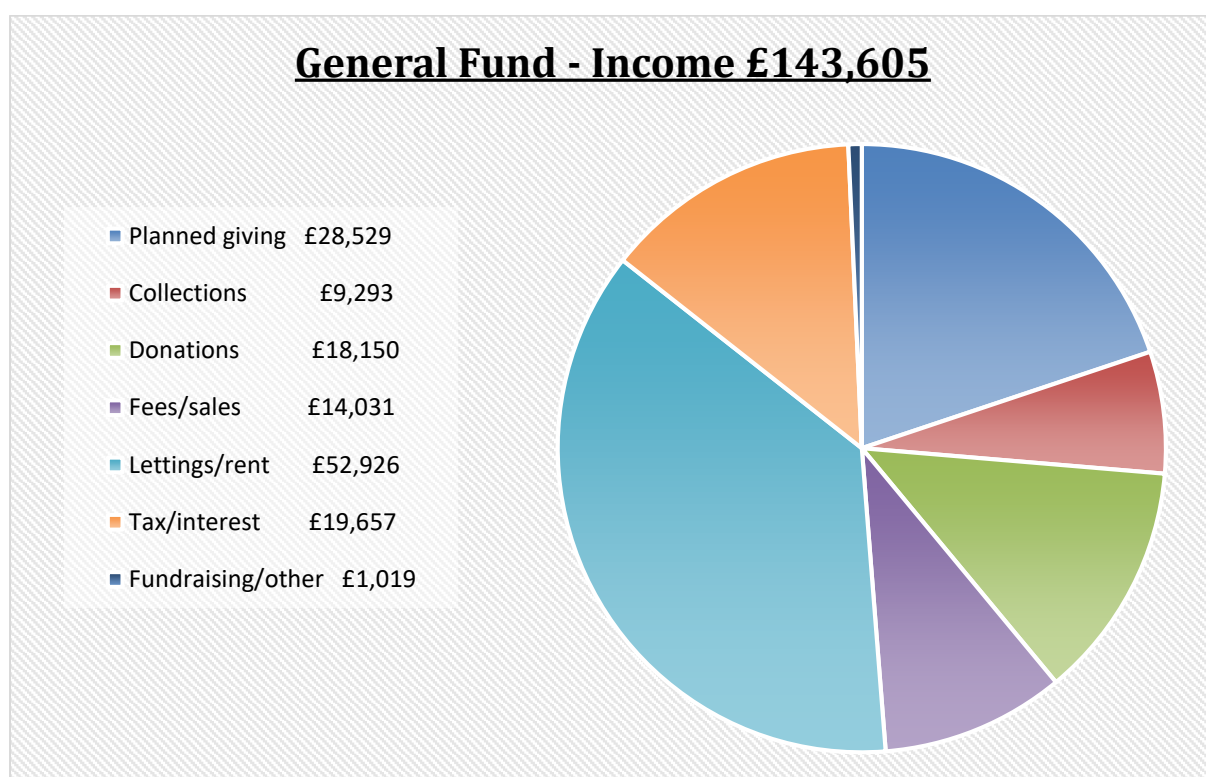
Finances 2019

John Wheatley, Churchwarden and Acting PCC Treasurer

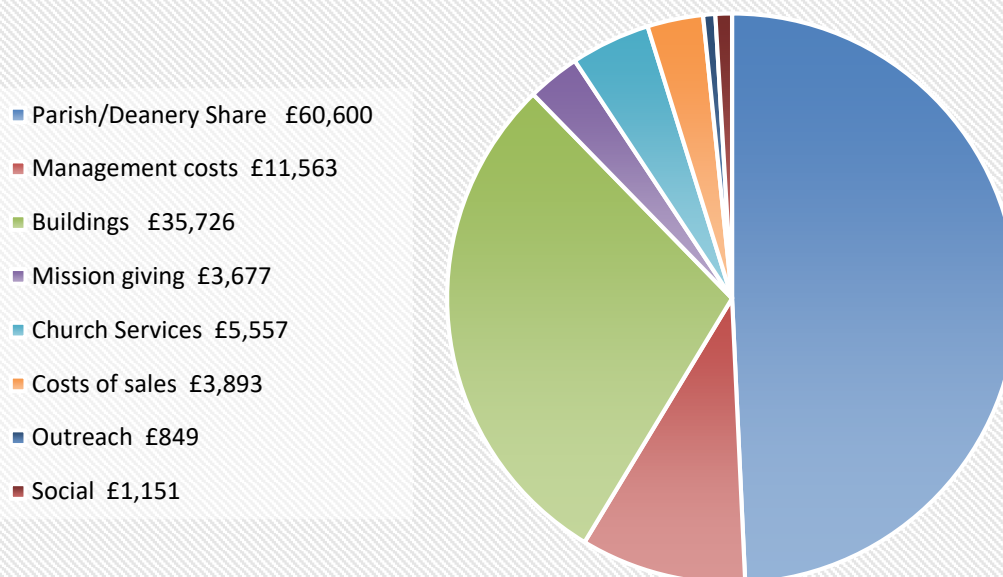
At the start of 2019, the PCC put into action the financial review we undertook at the end of 2018:

- We reduced our Parish share due to concerns regarding our ability to pay the increased amount. Our contribution to the diocese largely covers clergy stipends and pensions and the training of ordinands.
- We agreed that a minimum of 10% of all planned giving during the year would be mission giving and we are pleased to announce that £1500 was given to both SHOC and NLT.
- We agreed that we would carefully look at reducing our fixed costs relating to buildings whilst at the same time improving our AV systems.
- We also agreed that we would maintain a minimum of 3 Months operating costs in our Bank Account. Thanks to the generosity of our Church members, healthy residential rental incomes and hall hire, I am pleased to announce that we were able to achieve this.

Our restricted funds, e.g. buildings and churchyard, are in a healthy state and our ability to meet our improvement plans at both Churches remain viable.



General Expenditure - £123,016



The above charts show income and expenditure on the General Fund.

By way of explanation on the income side, “Fees” include charges for weddings and funerals, “Sales” covers the coffee shop and “Tax” is what we recover from gift aid. We are reliant on our income from rent and lettings and I am pleased to advise that these have grown by over 10% this year.

On the expenditure side, “Management costs” includes administration, office expenses, IT support, music licences, training and inspection fees, while “Buildings” includes minor maintenance, insurance, caretaking and utilities. “Church services” includes clergy expenses, junior church materials, organists, vergers expenses, costs of candles and Holy Communion wine and wafers.

In addition, each year we write down the initial cost of The St Andrews Church centre, this is not shown in our operating costs but is an annual cost of approximately £27,000.

Whilst the above is a general outline of our financial year, more details can be found in the “Report of the trustees and financial statements for the year ending 31 December 2019”.

Burnham and Slough Deanery Synod

John Wheatley

Deanery Synod Representative



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

In 2019 Four meetings were held : in February June September and November.

Whilst, as in previous years, finance was discussed, it was a year in which other items were prioritised. Synod have four Committees which meet regularly to present reports. These are Education, Standing and Finance, Mission and Pastoral and Treasurers.

The Key items presented and debated at the four meetings held during the year were;

February A centre for outreach

Members of our Synod visited outreach centres in other areas similar to Slough and Burnham, they suggested that we try to create a centre which will incorporate some if not all of the following under a social Justice cafe. Christians against poverty, A food Bank, Computer Classes, and English as a second language.

June Putting out into deep water / plans for the future

In March a conference was held at St Pauls entitled “looking into the Future” key items from this as a synod development tool were

- Social Hub (discussed at last Deanery Synod)
- Lay Community – commit to one year praying together & doing work in community, designed for 20 to 30 year olds who are still working full time
- Mission to Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities
- Expansion of Lighthouse ministry to teenagers who come to help.
- School Chaplaincy perhaps a Deanery Youth Chaplain with lay volunteers to offer chaplaincy and pastoral care in schools, creating prayer spaces in secular schools.

And during May members of our Synod attended a conference at High Leigh conference centre, chaired by Bishop Alan. Key items of this were discussed and planned around, these were

A common vision working group. Making a difference Parish Planning and a Synod Development Fund.

September Regeneration of Slough

During this meeting a presentation was given by Councillor Swindlehurst the Leader of Slough Council regarding the regeneration of Slough and how the Church could be involved, once again a key need identified was a social hub in the Town

November SHOC and Foodbank needs in Slough

A presentation was given by Leaders of the Foodbank and SHOC detailing their work, needs and how the Church can offer assistance. Some of the key needs were volunteers, finance and also locations as it was identified that it was very difficult for many people to get to local foodbanks due to a lack of travel resource.

Plans for next year will focus on many of these items.

Churchwardens

Simon McDowell & John Wheatley

As churchwardens, we are responsible for the running of the church, and we are grateful for all the help and support from the PCC, the church office and other church members to enable us to do this smoothly. During the year since the last APCM, we welcomed John Wheatley as a churchwarden, and he has been very helpful to both Natasha and Simon at finding the humour and God's message in all we do.

After a couple of years' of change, we embraced some stability in 2019, acting as a sounding board for Natasha's many great ideas and offer her support in all that she does. Our roles also have allowed us to support the PCC in taking on the PCC Secretary (Simon) and acting Treasurer role (John), following the retirement of Gaynor from the PCC.

Although we both support both churches, it is sometimes simpler to be 'responsible' for one each – so John helps with the running of St Andrews, including the flat lettings and supporting Ann in her caretaker and hall lettings roles, whilst Simon has continued with the maintenance at St Giles, albeit at a much slower pace than in previous years': thanks to the Mayer legacy, St Giles' is in its best form for decades.

Many thanks for the help and support that we have received from the congregation and we hope to continue to spread God's Word in 2020.

The Office

Debbie Langham, Parish Administrator,
Heather McDowell, Communications Officer
and Richard Beckingsale, Verger

2019 saw a few changes in the church office. In the autumn, Kate Holliday left the office, though not the congregation, after almost 20 years working for the church, to open a (very successful) gardening business. Debbie Langham, our organist of some years and experienced administrator at the Farnhams and Hedgerley churches, took up the reins. We acknowledged Kate's cheery and faithful service at our Harvest Festival.



Thank you Kate

Heather spent much of the summer and autumn researching and building a new church website, migrating our church email provider and trying to make all of the different systems link up effectively and securely. A huge learning curve and time investment! The team (including Natasha, some of the PCC and ministry leads) are now able to share information, pictures, music and ideas in a number of ways and the congregation can view the result on any type of device. At the end of 2019 we had:

Website: www.stokepogeschurch.org

Blog <https://stokepogeschurch.wordpress.com/blog/>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/stokepogeschurch>

Friday Newsletter on Mailchimp <https://stokepogeschurch.us4.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=bf288e849a2be0799fa3f4431&id=8a197aaef4>

Church email addresses and cloud storage for team members such as office@stokepogeschurch.org

Richard writes: "When I became the Verger I obtained a booklet that said I must maintain a close working relationship with the Parish Administrator. I quickly realised how right that was and I am pleased to say the Office team have always welcomed me. Making sure that I have the correct details for weddings and funerals has been vital, as has details of services.

Each year we get several queries about our graveyard and I am able to help with those."



As well as Honorary Verger and Sacristan, Richard is also our right hand man, font of knowledge and volunteer extraordinaire, for whom we are truly grateful!

Welcome Debbie

Chapter 4: LIFE Groups

KJTS Life Group

Through 2019 our life group was led by Karen Perez, Jeff Higgins and Tina and Simon Edwards. We meet every week on Thursday evenings in group members' homes in Stoke Poges.

We take it in turns to prepare and lead sessions. As well as studying the books of James, Malachi and Colossians, we have explored the names of God and how to pray for each other. The 6 session titles of the Paraclesis course, which we followed in Lent, sum up our group dynamic; Caring, Loving, Journeying, Living, Healing, Connecting.

We have journeyed together through bereavement and blessings, headaches and happy times: the sudden death of a brother, buying a house in the village, physical injuries and the wedding of a daughter. The group feels very much like family, we don't always agree on everything, but we make the effort to respect and embrace our differences. We love it when members' children choose to join us for the odd session and bring their own, fresh honesty, eg the challenge to apply what we study more to our lives and today's living!

We use WhatsApp to share prayer needs between Life Group meetings, and to encourage each other with good news, thanks, Bible verses, poems and songs. The highlight of 2019's much-looked-forward-to Caribbean-themed Christmas meal was definitely Laverne's home-made Jamaican black cake – lots of fruit soaked in lots of rum!



Deborah and Matthew Wetherall's Life Group

Our hope as Life Group is to deepen our faith and walk alongside each other in fellowship. Throughout 2019 there continued to be a sense of anticipation as we met with each other in the presence of God every Thursday night.

In parallel to the sermon series, the Life Group embraced delving into the Paraclesis course, with this helping us think deeper about 'coming alongside each other' and complimenting the 'Frontline' courses we have studied previously. (*18 months on,*

one of our members still carries around a Paraclesis 'kindness' card in his wallet as a practical reminder to share God's love with those we come into contact within our everyday lives!)

We explored Rosemary Green's 'Listening to God' ten session adventure in purposefully setting out to listen to God, whether it be directly or through an inner voice, dreams, visions or even the quiet – this particularly gave one of our members an opportunity to share many of the words she had heard recently from God. Other topics we covered included a Scottish Bible Society study on Jonah and a Methodist based study where we transported ourselves to experience what it was like for an early Christian living in Thessalonica.

We have continued to see many answers to prayer not only in our own lives but in the lives of family and friends some of whom do not yet have a relationship with God and have been touched by our faith in interceding on their behalf.

Ladies' Life Group

The Ladies' Life Group helped each other through all the usual ups and downs of life throughout 2019. We had a few hiccups with our studies, finding it difficult to follow the intensity of some of our previous courses. We started the year with Bob Goff's "Love Does", then studied the Paraclesis course alongside the other Life Groups. For the summer term, we supported Natasha and Nigel to run an Alpha course and ate a lot of cheese and cake, though sadly this did not bring any new people into our congregation.



We then embarked on a study of "Jonah – A Life Interrupted" by Priscilla Shirer, whose work we have really appreciated before but (ironically) in this study, we got pretty stuck half way through! Two of our group were confirmed by Bishop Alan at St Giles' in May, which was a great milestone for them. We enjoyed a couple of socials – in the summer at a local restaurant and at Christmas at Heather's house, where we had been meeting for most of the year.

From the Vicar

Revd Natasha Brady

Stoke Poges Church embraced the vision that was inspired by Jesus from the greatest commandment - to LOVE GOD and LOVE PEOPLE during 2019. As the year progressed, we began the process of articulating what this might mean. Which is why many of my sermons contained this vision statement and why I often referred to the values we hold. For they enable the mission of the church to be an expression of what God has called us to be and to do in Stoke Poges and beyond.

What are these values you may ask? Well they are to be Christ-like, relational, trustworthy and prayerful. All of which we have striven to be as a worshipping community. It has been most heartening to see our congregations really catch hold of all of this, and come together as we have built on the relationships we have in the village. It has also seen us embrace new opportunities to share the Good News of the gospel in word and deed throughout this year. Thank you everyone, for being the body of Christ in this place.

As a church we were invited to man the BBQ at the Horticultural Society. A huge team of volunteers graciously stepped in and cooked, served and and chatted to hundreds of visitors to this historic event. Sporting our Church T-shirts we were a visible presence in the community shining out the love of Christ while flipping burgers and slicing bread. We have booked to return in 2020 to do the same again, so well done and thank you to all who helped with that project: your efforts were appreciated.

The village school has been a place of growing involvement - which is amazing. The relationship between school and church has grown warmer. We are now the 'go to' for all things faith related, even when it is not our particular area of expertise. This year saw a significant increase in invitations for St Giles' to be used as a place of learning and exploration. We were able to offer workshops and lessons on Saints & Martyrs, and Places of Worship alongside hosting their annual Carol Concert. The collaborative History day with the Memorial Gardens and the Stoke Poges History Society happened in June this year. Caldicote school continues to extend a regular welcome, inviting me to lead and preach at their weekly Evensong a few times per term. Their Choir had great fun during the summer, visiting us too, as they came to sing at a Wedding for one of our local couples. A real treat for all concerned. We are continuing to foster good links with the Teikyo School and we were able to help them celebrate their 25th anniversary in the village. They would love to spend more time helping us with the autumn leaf clearing but the leaves this year refused to drop in time, before their winter holidays, so sadly that was missed this year. Thankfully, they are always happy to serve and be present at church services that

have a more civic nature to them, like Remembrance Sunday, so we include them and encourage their participation as much as possible.

Building on the opportunities for evangelism that our seasonal services bring, we worked on making the Harvest Festival more inclusive to those enquiring about the Christian faith. I appreciate that it did cause a little bit of consternation for the more traditionally minded amongst you but, if we truly want to grow and be good news to all, we had to give it a go, and thank the Lord for it was a success. It encouraged non-regular churchgoers to come and hear about God, and creation, whilst allowing us to extend our giving further by collecting items to make up bags for DASH, a local charity that houses and helps women and children who are fleeing domestic violence situations. SHOC was also a thankful recipient of many of the food items. The marrows were beautifully decorated for the Harvest Supper, which was also well attended.

The Remembrance Service returned to St Giles' this year, but was also developed. We hosted a 24 hour prayer vigil for peace and then marched from the flagpole to the church, weaving our way through the fields, changing muddy boots for clean shoes, as we entered the church for the service. The crowds that followed us along the mile-long walk and then joined us to worship as a community far exceeded my expectations. It was a glorious time and the coffee and chat after the service was vibrant and affirming. You were most generous in your hospitality to those known to you and unknown, so thank you. I felt we were truly encouraging inviting all to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'.

Christmas was its usual whirlwind of concerts, services and candles but this year we preceded it with our 'Angel Landings' initiative. Knit and Natter helped by creating over a 100 little woolly angels who all had a card attached, encouraging people to take them home, name and display them. They also carried an invitation to take a look at our new church website and see what great things they could get involved with. The local shops were very kind and let me distribute them amongst their shelves and the school hid some each day for the children to find and take home. I must say, all the angels disappeared and interesting conversations were had with quite a few people who were intrigued by them. A good starting point for building a sense of awe and wonder for the Advent season, an exercise we will continue with into 2020 and 2021 ... so many more folk will have an angel land in their street or place of work, spreading the Christmas story.

Finally, we tried something completely new - we Wassailed. I know, it wasn't the Pagan version, it was instead a "fresh expression" of it, incorporating lantern making, the Heritage walk, and carols on the Repton bridge. This outdoor service enabled us to use friendship, evangelism, song and hospitality to re-tell the story of

Christmas in a creative way. The choir turned out in full force to support it, and we warmed ourselves with mulled cider and hot mince pies back in the church. Over 70 people came and quite a few of them had never be seen by any of us before, which was exciting to note. Interestingly, a significant number of them were in the 18-30 age bracket. Perhaps this is a new opportunity for us to reach out and form relationships with this demographic? Only time will tell but we will work with Franzl in the Memorial Gardens to do this again.

As 2019 drew to a close and 2020 began, there was much to ponder on. As a congregation, we have grown a little in number but more impressively we have grown in our discipleship. As I have spent time with life groups and individuals I have been warmed by the continued desire to actively live out your faith. The legacy of the Paracelsis course still features in what we are saying and doing as a church. It was a useful programme that gave us the means by which to develop the Mission Action Plan so it meets us where we are now as a church. I hope you agree that, as God's people, we are journeying with Christ and serving all for the glory of God's kingdom. Thank you so much for all that you have done, this year has been joyful and a blessing. And as we strive to live out the love that God has shown to us in Christ Jesus, may His grace sustain us in the year to come.

Rev Natasha Brady September 2020.