

Stoke Poges Church

St Giles' and St Andrew's

Annual Report for activities in 2021

Welcome to our Annual Report which is coming to you via the blog ready for our APCM. We report on activities between Jan-Dec 2021.

The meeting will follow the 11am Family Service and lunch at St Andrew's on Sunday 22nd May, starting the meeting at approx. 1pm.

Children & Young People

Baby Steps – Revd Natasha

This group meets every Tuesday in term time. At the beginning of the year our group was still meeting as a support group - in accordance with Government guidelines but as the year progressed we expanded our offer to local Mums, Carers and Grandparents.



The format of stories and songs based around a short baby sized bible story continued to be appreciated and loved. The group has its favourite songs, like 'The Wiggle Song' and 'Lion's Roar' - both Christian worship songs for toddlers. We've even aired them on a Sunday at St Andrew's to the delight of some of the children and grandparents who know them from this group.

The main joy of this group has been the way that we have found a new way to encourage and minister to the tiniest of our community in a meaningful way. We were even able to offer a 'Thanksgiving service' during one of our sessions in the Spring. Something that both parents appreciate and the group loved. This sparked an interest in Christian Baptism and from that some babies have come to St Giles' and St Andrew's for their Christenings. In a time where Church has needed to be creative in its outreach and kingdom building, this has been a positive thing for us at Stoke Poges Church.

During the warmer months, we made the most of the newly forming Eco-garden and could offer play time with toys! As the veg grew the babies and toddlers

explored the low borders helping to pick courgettes and peas and cress. They even had a go at planting sunflowers, most of which grew, thank goodness. Natasha's chicken 'Diana' made a guest appearance in the summer and this helped to cement the week's theme of God's creation.

By the Autumn, confidence was on the rise and the needs of the group had evolved, therefore we were able to start with songs and stories in the chapel and then move into the main hall for playtime with toys, trikes and dressing up clothes. The buzzy atmosphere of old was slowly returning. Numbers are not huge, but they are consistent. Relationships are growing and the flow between this group and other church related activities is growing.

In December, we returned to having a Christmas Party. The children were given a Christian centric present, had a table full of lunch time treats and we played, laughed and listened to carols. It was fun.

Your continued prayers are needed as we work our way through 2022. Our helpers are fabulous, as always, and I would like to thank them for all their help and compassion, for the families are truly thankful for this ministry and opportunity to meet in person. As we continue though we will need more help. Especially with setting up the toys, as this is currently a solo exercise for me.

So may I take this opportunity to give a heartfelt - *Thank you* ... to you all. Keep praying, and if you want to help out ... get in touch with me. There is lots you can do!



Natasha

KiC – Kids in Christ – Janet Cottrell

Junior Church for children aged 7-11 years

When the country went back into Lockdown in January 2021, "KiC in a box" continued with crafts being delivered directly to families for children of Junior school age. It was fun watching the children complete the activities during our Family Zoom services.



In April 2021, children and their families were asked to create random colourful “patterns” in any media. Heather McDowell used these to compose a collage of the cross which was displayed at our Easter services

We returned to in-person sessions in May, starting with services in the Eco-garden where children enjoyed “Messy Church”, gradually moving back to services in St Andrews as Government restrictions were eased. At the start of the new school term in September we restarted our regular KiC sessions and now meet on the 2nd and 4th Sundays of the month in the Chapel at St Andrews. The theme for each session follows that of the main service and includes teaching and discussion around the bible passage with a craft and other fun activities when numbers allow.

After the Harvest morning service at St Giles in October, children from KiC helped to “dress” the marrows, which were then auctioned off at the Harvest supper that evening.

Church families joined together at the Christmas eve services for a rendition of “A little bit of love” – a very popular new song written by Graham Kendrick during Lockdown.

7Up – Simon Edwards

7Up is a safe space for teenagers to connect and build relationships with each other and with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Taking Hebrews 10: 24-25 to heart, we have continued to meet twice a month during term time, on Zoom and in the St. Andrew’s Coffee Shop, to spur one another on towards God’s love and good deeds. This in itself is worth celebrating!

Although sad to say farewell to a number of older members in 2021; Ruth, Oliver and Toby, we have been grateful for 2 younger members joining; Holli and Abigail.

In the Spring and Summer terms we considered the differences between the early church seen in the book of Acts and the church today, and why these differences may exist. We also explored Forgiveness, Holy Communion, our gifts, their source and how to use them.



Since the autumn term on the 2nd Sunday of each month in the St. Andrew's coffee shop and on Zoom, Jamie and Lizzie have run 7Up 'full fat' sessions which look and feel like more 'typical' 7Up sessions; fun, food, fellowship and faith. In these times together we have taken a sideways look at the Bible passage being unpacked in the main service, most often through a cunning challenge set by Jamie.

On the 4th Sunday of each month, since September, Hannah has led a 7Up 'Bible Club' on Zoom, supported by Simon on Zoom and by Jamie in the St. Andrew's coffee shop. In these sessions we are exploring the different types of book in the Old Testament and in the New Testament and some of their key theme:- origins, turning points, gospel accounts, wisdom literature, prophecy, poetry, and more.

We have dug deeper into Bible passages using a consistent framework of questions. This has helped our young people to consider ways of reading and discovering the Bible for themselves. We have started to question things in a deeper way, opening up further discussion and it has allowed us to really think about the messages we get from the Bible.

We are a welcoming, adaptable bunch of young people and leaders. We hope and pray more young people and leaders will choose to join in what the Lord is doing in 7Up in 2022.

Safeguarding – Revd Natasha

Stoke Poges Church continues to take safeguarding very seriously. Our safeguarding policy was reviewed and updated and approved by the PCC at the March 2022 PCC meeting. It is on display in the St Andrew's Centre and on St Giles' noticeboard.



Year on year safeguarding is refined and reviewed on a national scale and this inevitably leads to a trickle down of change. This year the Oxford Diocese rolled out a new pathway of learning for safeguarding. Now everyone who has a role that requires some training in this area have online courses to take, called the Basic level. There are further levels to undertake for those who have some sort of leadership or trustee role within the life of the Church, most of which can be accessed via 'virtual classes'. This has been most helpful during the ongoing pandemic, so our congregation could start, or continue their training. The highest levels of safeguarding training have a short essay-style reflection element, to ensure that what has been taught is embedded. This more intentional learning

means that time and energy are needed but the rewards of a safer and more aware volunteer team is paying dividends in our approach to mission.

We must never become complacent with regard to our children and vulnerable adults' care, for we are there to be a layer of protection and a place of safety. Their trust must be kept, and good safeguarding helps with this. 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 safer recruitment process.

Our annual Safeguarding Audit showed we are reasonably robust. Due to the pandemic, there has been a lot less face to face mission but those that have been active are up to date with all that is needed and for some their ministries have evolved to become more pastoral so they have done more training. Those who have taken a step back, or paused their volunteer work will be reviewed in 2022 and their training tailored to what they are doing then.

As a reminder, remember that DBS certificates only last 3 years, so if you know yours has run out please contact Natasha or Margriet Wells to have them renewed. The same applies for all safeguarding training. We have a log, and will try to contact you promptly but your assistance in this would be appreciated.

Natasha continues 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.

Revd Natasha x

Getting Involved

Knit and Natter – Sarah Marzetti

We were unable to meet regularly from March 2020 to April 2021 due to Covid shutdowns and restrictions, so it was with joy that a few of us were able to meet up in the garden at St Andrews to share our makes and enjoy socialising again. We were projectless until the summer when we as a group, hit upon the idea of decorating the post box near the Threeways doctors surgery.



Our first efforts were anonymous, with only a handful of people having seen us put our creations on display. The villagers loved our handwork and posted pictures on the village facebook pages thanking the “Yarny Banksy’s” for cheering people up, so we decided to come clean.

We have so far done: Wildlife animals and bees (which was sadly stolen), The Owl and the Pussy Cat, Harvest festival, Remembrance with service men and poppies, Snowmen (One of which has remained in situ), a New Year baby and hearts and jellybabies for Valentine’s Day. More recently, we have had the current conflict in Ukraine in our thoughts as we made hearts in the colours of their national flag and sunflowers, which are their national flower; to this we added flowers for Mothering Sunday. Our latest post box toppers are themed around Easter and we have the Jubilee theme well underway.

We now take our own pictures and proudly publish these on Facebook using these as an advert for new members for our little group, recently welcoming 6 new ladies, who join us for woolly merriment, friendship and a cuppa. It doesn’t stop on a Wednesday morning, with our new WhatsApp chat, we share our makes and ideas outside of the meetings too.

We have been asked by the Parish Council to have a stall at the Jubilee Picnic where we will be selling some of our creations, with proceeds going to our favourite charity Alexander Devine Hospice.

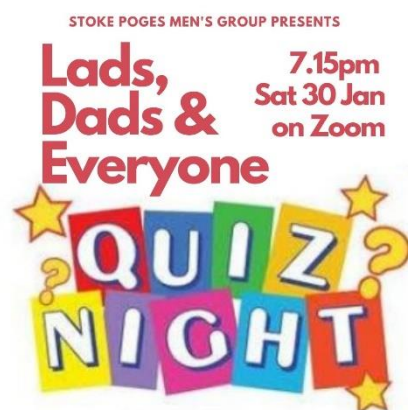
St Andrew's Worship Team – Heather McDowell

We continued to share Worship Leading and curation of the music for online services between Tina, Heather, Janet and Lindsey Mackie, who was able to resume in-person services with us in the Autumn. Without relying heavily on a couple of people for live music, we are limited to using videos and audio tracks for most services. Preparing and operating the technology also falls to just a couple of people every week and it would be great to be able to share it with a few more people on a rota. We do try to keep it as simple as possible to avoid hiccups and have parked the idea of streaming St Andrew's services until we have more hands.

Stoke Poges Men's Group – Nigel Lowe

During the past year, the pandemic has been a concern for the men's group but has not deterred us from planning and running events. Last May and July we were able to run two virtual events, a Curry Night and a "Bring your own Bacon" Men's Breakfast. In September, we finally returned to running "real" events again, our first one since the pandemic began. Many guys were still nervous about mixing with others, so although we did not have a big response, our visit to Ascot Brewery was a great success, with plenty of beer to sample and excellent food. The year ended on a high with an excellent Men's Dinner at the South Buckinghamshire Golf Club, where almost 40 guys enjoyed a lovely meal and an inspiring talk from Paul Cowley MBE.

Sadly, due to a sudden increase in Covid-19 infections at the start of 2022, our first two events of the year had to be cancelled. We are not though discouraged by this and will be going ahead with a full plan of events for the rest of this year.



Reapers – Simon McDowell

The beginning of the year was spent trying to repair old mowers and strimmers that had not had attention in 2020 with a variety of techniques – one mower now sports part of a washing machine to hold it together! We had a couple of mowers that we could not repair, but thankfully these were replaced with two unwanted mowers from people in the community.

Relaxation of Covid rules meant that we could offer teas and coffees again and the convivial nature of the reaping team returned along with some more of our regulars following the disruption of 2020. The new reapers who joined us last year have remained with us in 2021 and I am very grateful for help from all reapers, of all ages and abilities.



We still welcome more members to join us – please see the Friday email for details on when we meet or ask me to add you to our WhatsApp group. We meet every 2-3 weeks between April and September with one or two working parties later in the year to help with leaf clearing and autumn jobs. You don't have to mow if that's not your thing – there are the roses to tend to and the ivy on some of the walls too.

Flowers at St Giles' – Jennifer Pickering

After the events of the past two years, it has been such a joy and pleasure to be able to return to decorating St Giles' with floral displays.

We have a dedicated team who produce an arrangement by the altar on a rota through the year. For festivals such as Easter, Christmas and Harvest, the whole team meets to decorate the church.

Our church is open for visitors throughout the week and positive comments are often made in the visitors' book about the peace and tranquility they feel in the church. I am sure the presence of the beautiful flowers adds to their experience.

May I put in a pleas for more people to join the the flower arrangers? You don't need expertise, just a love of flowers. It is amazing how a block of floral foam can help to create a work of art!



St Andrew's Ecogarden – Revd Natasha

In February 2021 three separate groups asked the Vicar if they could make use of the land adjacent to St Andrew's ... Natasha had always envisioned that this area would have a 'pocket garden' of some sort so, after a lot of thought and prayer, two leaders emerged – Karrie & Hannah - who were happy to start St Andrew's Eco-Garden.



Throughout the spring a 'Core Team' was gathered – both from within the church and beyond. This was to be a community project that had a Christian foundation to provide a space for us to worship, to be a place of peace and accessible for all generations and abilities and where local people and groups could grow things. So as we started out we held 'work' days – fed people – and gathered resources from around the village



By the summer the 'grand plan' had evolved and the sheer enormity of the project was quite daunting. This was going to take a few years to create ... but the journey and relationships we managed to develop were kingdom building. The journey out of lockdown afforded us the opportunity to hold church services in the garden. Despite the challenges of uneven ground and moving lecterns onto grass – it worked and brought St Andrew's back together in a safe way.



During the summer months, we were approached by the Duke of Edinburgh scheme who asked if they could help. Of course, we said YES – and through the summer we helped some achieve their Bronze award and started others on their Gold Award. They have been a blessing to us, enabling children's ministry to go outside – in the form of 'Family Events'.

Karrie created a programme of hedgehog house building, sweet pea tee-pees and other such things. Some



were well attended, others not, but for our first year, we were very happy just to be there.

As the summer warmed up and people's seed donations and plant offerings began to grow, the St Andrew's Eco-Garden loved sharing the produce with local people. Each Sunday they would bring in goodies for the congregation. We sent much out to the lonely and vulnerable ... who were very pleased to receive veg grown by local children for them.

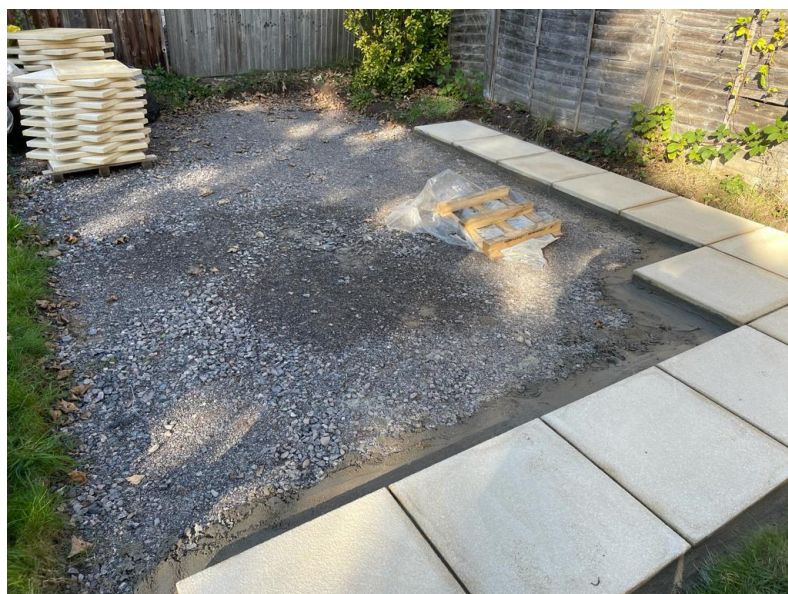


All who we spoke to were encouraged to come and look at the garden and join in as and when they were able.

A watering rota was created and alongside the Core Team some of the Baby Steps mums joined in, ensuring everything stayed alive through the summer holidays ready for picking in the Autumn.

In the Winter months, a local builder came and gave up his time to begin the hard task of laying a disability friendly patio.

All this planning, building and growing would not have been possible without the team's hard work the Church & Parish Council's support and local people joining in ... so thank you – and may God's Kingdom keep growing.



The Grand Plan



Behind the Scenes

Office & Communications - Heather McDowell

Throughout the year the Office Team of Natasha, Debbie, Heather, Richard, and Ann met on a Monday morning for prayers; followed by a session ensuring that all our diaries were in accord. At the beginning of 2021 we met on Zoom, keeping up with ongoing changes to the Covid pandemic and how this related to the church providing a safe environment. Where the yellow line would be at St. Andrew's and its virtual equivalent at St. Giles'; how many people could we allow at weddings and at funeral services?

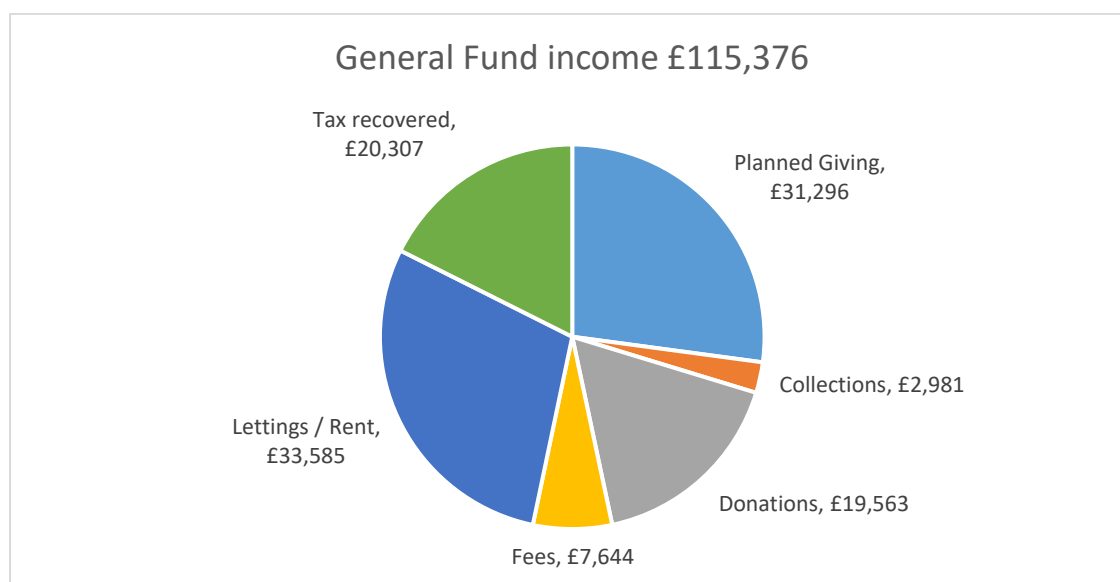
As the year progressed, we developed a balance of home working, in-office hours and multitasking to cover the occasional spanner in the works of someone going down with Covid. We even managed to redecorate the church office!

Between us we try to ensure that the doors are open (or locked) when they should be, that congregation, hirers, visitors and tradesmen are all well met, lines of communication are kept live and information produced in good time and with clarity.

Finances – John Wheatley

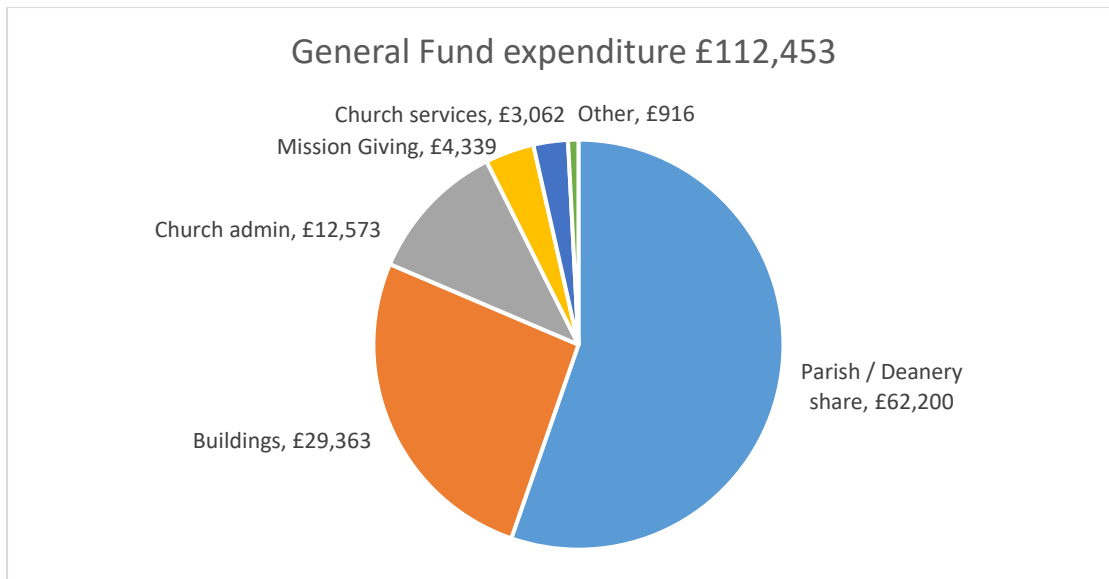
2021 proved to be a difficult year to manage our finances due to the ongoing effects of Covid. Once again, however we maintained our budgeted commitments, which included:

- **Parish Share** We maintained our committed Parish Share. Our contribution to the Diocese largely covers clergy stipends and pensions and the training of ordinands.
- **Mission Giving** We maintained that a minimum of 10% of all planned giving during the year would be mission giving and we will be donating to SHOC and NLT in line with last year. We once again committed additional funds to outreach for the village.
- **AV System** We continued to work on improving our AV systems to meet new styles of Worship.
- **Governance** We maintained a minimum of 3 months operating costs in our bank account, thanks to the generosity of our Church members.



By way of explanation on the income side, “Fees” include charges for weddings and funerals and “Tax” is what we recover from gift aid.

We are reliant on our income from rent and lettings, rent for the year fell due to a period of vacancy at one of the flats offsetting an improvement from revenue from Hall lettings, we expect this revenue to improve overall next 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 shown in our restricted fund operating costs, not on the chart above, but this year the cost was £25,936 and is not a cash cost, but an accounting one.

Our General Fund was £2,923 in surplus, but additional costs in the restricted funds meant that we had an overall deficit or reduction in funds of £25,095.

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 2021” available on our [website here](#).

Churchwardens – Simon McDowell & John Wheatley

After the difficulties in coming to terms with the pandemic in 2020, 2021 was more of the same. Unfortunately, for part of the year, we were unable to come together at all, and when we did reopen, it was on a socially distanced basis and many from our congregation were understandably nervous about coming back to church.

Our role as churchwardens is to assist Natasha to do her ministry in the parish, whilst we try to take care of the day-to-day activities. We both have additional roles as PCC Secretary (Simon) and acting Treasurer (John) and we are particularly

helped by Richard, our vergers, who is a “can-do” source of knowledge and help on a daily basis.

Our concerns in 2021 were partly the same as 2020, in maintaining a careful eye on risk, but a need to serve our community by opening when it was safe, but we began to look ahead, with the Eco Garden and the plan to build three new flats above the Coffee Shop, Hastings Room and office at St Andrew's, thereby replacing the old roof at the same time. We hope to have a decision in 2022.

As always, we are grateful to Natasha for her spiritual guidance and ever-strengthening links to other members of our community, as well as the PCC, the church office and other church members to help us do this smoothly and we give thanks for the help and support that we have received from the congregation during 2021.

PCC Secretary – Simon McDowell

Our PCC remained on a virtual basis for the start of 2021 as the restrictions continued to keep us apart. We held five PCC meetings during the year, of which two were virtual and three together. Sadly, our informal, longer meeting was shelved for a second year, but we hope to hold it in June 2022. We consisted of five elected members, two elected representatives of the Deanery Synod, two churchwardens and our Vicar. Average attendance at PCC meetings was 80%.

Our PCC has two active working committees:

- the Property Committee, which is responsible to the PCC for the upkeep of the fabric of both church buildings. It met three times, including one virtual meeting. It consists of six PCC members and welcomes from time to time other church members who are experts in property matters and whose help is much appreciated; and
- 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. Although the Vicar and Churchwardens meet regularly, the Standing and Finance committee only met once during the year.

With the continued restrictions on opening the hall for hire and with the lower number of services for much of the year, the PCC continued to maintain its focus on supporting the needy and vulnerable in our parish as outreach. It also supported the establishment of the St Andrew's Eco Garden as an example of Mission to come to the church community.

The PCC meeting also considered the risks as we entered and emerged from lockdowns, the maintenance of the church buildings and their safe reopening later in the year.

The reports of the other activities that took place during the year in our church community 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 and there is a separate Treasurer's report to describe what has happened financially.

Deanery Synod

There were 4 Meeting of Deanery Synod held during the year plus a special Treasurers Meeting (held at St Paul's Church) in July to resolve our Parish Share formula.

Key activities undertaken at these meetings were

1. Appointment of the Reverend Canon Janet Binns as Area Dean
2. Ongoing efforts to agree on a Formula for Parish Share across all Churches in the Deanery with a range of between 80% to 120% of basic rate £60,000
3. Fees for Weddings and funerals to be allocated back to Church of origin, however for 1 year, all fees to be retained by Deanery as part payment of Parish Share
4. St Pauls' Intercultural Hub: Plans are underway to affirm and build up St Paul's Slough as the model church for intercultural mission and ministry in the Diocese of Oxford.

Following on from a year of discussions regarding Parish Share, it was felt that the first meeting of this year (held at St Andrew's) was very much a more relaxed event with more Focus on the real requirements of the Deanery.

The meaning of LIFE

Ladies' Life Group

After a difficult time for each of us over the lockdowns, we participated in the Archbishop's Lent study via Zoom and welcomed two extra members for this. In the summer, we returned to meeting in person, firstly just sharing our daily battles, then trying out a study on Isaiah. We struggled to maintain concentration on studies, with energy to lead the group and generally with attendance, as family needs and

other commitments encroached on our Wednesday evenings and so we have decided to “rest” the Ladies Life Group for the time being with the hope of resuming it when the appetite returns.

JTS Life Group

2021 was a break-out year for many of us, and for others we have learned to endure with patience, wisdom and grace our work, family and health challenges. Through it all we have kept meeting together, (on Zoom) and we have all grown closer to God and to each other, by leaning not on our own understanding and trusting more in God’s unfailing love, mercy, protection and provision.

On the back of the Alpha course, which finished in December, we invited others to join us in a LICC course – ‘Proverbs: Wisdom for the whole of life’. And indeed we enjoyed the fresh perspective and lively participation of three guest members for the six weeks of the course. It was a great start, which set us up for the year.

We also explored the NT epistle, 2 Peter ‘lectio divina style’ and the OT book of Daniel using the CWR Cover to Cover resource ‘Daniel: Living Boldly for God’. Our study of Daniel during a pandemic was a timely reminder that the Lord is always with us, even in the fiery furnace of great trials. The Hillsong worship song, ‘Another In the Fire’ expresses this beautifully. We also were encouraged and emboldened to speak truth to power in love on our frontlines.

There is lots of laughter whenever we get together. In the summer, we managed to safely physically gather, including some of our children. It was a wonderful afternoon, a highlight of the year.

We share and pray each week; giving thanks to our Father in heaven for all his benefits and asking him for his help in our everyday lives. We are no longer surprised by the Lord’s generosity in all areas - The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.

In the weeks leading up to COP26 in November we examined our own lives and the world, creation, and the mess we have made of it. We studied what the Bible tells us is our role in creation care. We asked ourselves what we can do individually and collectively to make a positive difference locally and globally, through our choices, actions, influence and prayers. We were led through this process by the excellent Katharine Hayhoe in a series of videos and questions provided by Tearfund. We

recommend them to any group or individual who is seeking help in this area of Christian mission.

Links:

[Proverbs: Wisdom for the Whole of Life | LICC](#)

[Cover to Cover Bible Study - Daniel: Living Boldly for God 9781853459863 | Eden Christianity and climate change - Tearfund](#)

Deborah and Matthew's Life Group



Our hope as a Life Group is to deepen our faith and walk alongside each other in fellowship on a weekly basis.

Throughout 2021 we continued meeting via Zoom every week for prayer, fellowship and Bible study. With Covid restrictions continuing to limit the opportunity to meet others face to face, Life Group has proved an invaluable constant in retaining social contact and Christian fellowship within the Group.

Praise along with pastoral prayer (for each other, our communities and the world) are a very important facet of our weekly meetings. We give thanks to God for the prayers he has answered this year and the opportunity to walk alongside each other as we move through challenges and different seasons of our lives.

Over the year we completed the LICC "Worshipping the God of All in All Life" study of David's Psalms, and during Lent we studied the Church of England Live Lent

course 'God's Story Our Story' which explored how we can live God's story and share it with everyone we meet.

A highlight of the year for many of us was learning about how to engage with the important issue of Climate Change from a Christian perspective. We studied the excellent Tearfund 'Christianity and Climate Change' course featuring Katharine Hayhoe, the internationally renowned Christian climate scientist. Our course coincided with the COP 26 conference in Glasgow and enabled group members to learn how best to take small practical actions including understanding how to talk to others about climate change.

Despite this being another turbulent year due to Covid, we have been reminded once again of the blessings and benefits of meeting regularly as a Life Group in terms of fellowship, growth in our walk with God and answered prayer. God is good!

Vicar's Report

Stoke Poges Church is a place where we strive to know God, follow Jesus, love others and invite all.

After a very difficult 2020, at the start of 2021, we could have been forgiven for thinking - Oh NO! Here we go again. For, once more, we entered a National Lockdown due to Covid - 19 and the Church had to think carefully about how it could serve. To begin with, we had to go online. St Giles' was able to remain open for private prayer, and each day a dedicated group of volunteers deep cleaned it. Thank you to all our stalwarts for keeping that going. It was a quiet oasis in a national time of trauma.

As the situation grew less dangerous, we began the process of re-introducing face to face services. For pastoral and safety reasons we chose to offer one service at St Giles' in the morning and a 4pm Zoom service for St Andrew's and housebound folk. Our first in person service was Easter Sunday! I think it went well. Sadly the chocolate eggs were retired for the year but we did put out an Easter Trail that used QR codes to tell the Easter Story; an outdoor activity that we hope was used and appreciated.

Online, we stretched ourselves with the technology, and had to come up with some ingenious ways of doing All Age services that had an intergenerational flavour to them, but numbers were consistent and good. The chats at the end of the Zoom service were loved and offered us times of fellowship.

#Lent Live on Facebook went well - with Nigel Lowe and I hosting it each week. Using the Archbishop's Lent book we had a short service of the word with a 'moment's thought'. It was enjoyable to do, and well received, bringing back into the fold those who had moved away from Stoke Poges and others who had engaged with the church only occasionally before.

As a Community Mission project, we had started Baby Steps in the Autumn of 2020. As it was considered a support group we were able to keep it open through lockdown. The group really enjoyed meeting and spending time together. The stories would sometimes get ignored as new developmental goals were cooed over by the Mum's but, on the whole, the format of a short bible story, songs and other themed stories around the week's main bible theme worked. We were even able to hold a short Thanksgiving service for one baby. All joined in enthusiastically, and others then booked baptisms for later in the year.

Our charitable links were further enhanced - thanks to Zoom - as the Nepal Leprosy Trust shared with us a link to a video of their current projects and needs. Thank you Matthew Wetherall for arranging that for us, and giving the congregation a chance to engage more deeply with NLT. Normally we would hold a cake sale and have a special Sunday for them but that was not possible and this was a good alternative that many responded to.

After a long, long wait, our project to make St Giles' car parking safer was completed. We were able to install CCTV in the small car park and at the foot of the driveway. A bright light was fitted on an incredibly tall pole, that shines glaringly for 30 minutes if you park near it at night. This has moved the drug dealers on and no car break-ins have been reported since it was all done. Long may that remain. The hope is that it will help folk feel safe using the facilities and therefore increase Church attendance.

With the ever changing landscape and restrictions, I found myself back to doorstep visits and pastoral phone calls. A number of the initial pastoral calling team, established in 2020, were happy to continue with their calls, which allowed us to keep connections alive around the parish for our most isolated and vulnerable folk. It also saw us revisiting the Store Cupboard, our Community venture, to meet the food and isolation issues of our local residents. Reflecting on what we had learnt the first time, we split the effort into two distinctive parts. One was to offer 'well being' baskets of goodies to those still stuck inside - offering baked goods and luxury items in a beautifully wrapped basket along with magazines and a friendly face. We sent out over a 100 easily. The other part of the mission saw us collecting and then distributing basic necessities to families, who were now struggling financially due to repeated lockdowns and a reduction or cessation in pay, a task we kept up as a solo

enterprise by the summer, so that families were fed and nurtured over the school summer break.

Back in May 2020, the Area Dean - Rod Cosh moved post and this left us with a difficult choice as an area. Can we afford a replacement or do we ask one of our current serving clergy to take on the role? After consultation with the Diocese it was agreed that an interim Area Dean role should be offered. To ensure that it met the needs of all our Deanery, I was part of the Sub-Committee that wrote the profile and short listed the candidates. I am happy to report that Revd Janet Binns was welcomed in the Autumn and so far has made a positive impact on our Deanery.

On 2nd May 2021, St Andrew's was finally able to meet in person. Using the EcoGarden, we held an All Age service and began trialling a new format, splitting the service into three sections - Fun, Faith, Food - exploring the bible passage in word, action, deed and a communal meal. It was easier to organise, took fewer volunteers and fitted the risk assessment requirements. As the summer progressed, these outdoor services became a vibrant life-line to compliment our online activities. People were slowly starting to come back to church and mutual respect for one another's journey was evident in how we cared and related to one another. Such a blessing to see families and friends able to worship and sing!

Of course as the summer months came around, so the wedding season reignited. After a year of delays, most of our 2020 couples managed to hold their services. Those who had opted for 'Lockdown' Weddings returned for their one year anniversary and a Wedding Blessing so more family and friends could share in their joy. It was a busy time, and although confidence to mingle was low and seating plans still had some restrictions, all went off well. The difficulties of the last year or so have meant that I was able to spend more time nurturing and witnessing Jesus to these couples, so please pray that the seeds sown begin to grow and we begin to see more of them staying part of our worshipping community moving forward.

This summer it was Thomas Gray's 250th Anniversary of his death. Jointly with the Stoke Poges Society, we put on an art exhibition that concentrated on images of the tomb or portraits of Gray. The week long exhibit saw over 200 visitors who thoroughly enjoyed seeing art from the late Revd Cyril Harris, various works donated by Eton College, Pembroke College - Cambridge, Harvey Whittam, The Stoke Poges Memorial Gardens, The Gutteridge family, and the University of California. Added to that Stoke Poges School painted some wonderful portraits of Gray that were exhibited in the Hastings Chapel and Heather McDowell hosted a sketching afternoon.

Our local Parish Councillors contributed too, they came on the Saturday to serve refreshments and help guide people around the church. It felt like a very unifying

experience that celebrated a much-loved poet and gave locals an opportunity to engage with their village church. A good community endeavour, and such a privilege to be able to do it.

After missing the Horticultural Society Show in 2020, we were delighted to be invited back to BBQ again in 2021. Wearing our church t-shirts and our shiny new aprons, we proudly displayed our Christian heart as we served burgers and hot dogs to hungry show goers. It was hard work, but we sold out of goodies by late afternoon and only burnt a few sausages. This has proved to be an excellent way for the Church to have a visible presence in the community and allow the God-centric conversations to happen naturally. The organisers were very pleased with our efforts and have invited us to return in 2022.

As part of our ongoing mission to love God and Love People, we saw an opportunity to do good with what we had been given by the Mobbs Trust for the Christmas Lunch (which had by necessity been turned into a hamper deliver in 2020 and hence not used much of the money). Instead, we had a trip to the seaside - entitled "Christmas" Seaside Outing. Offering it to those who come to the Christmas lunch for seniors and by asking them to contribute towards the lunch, we were able to take about 20+ people to Worthing for the day. I must thank Jane Wall for her fabulous organising - she made it a special day for those able to come, many of whom had not been anywhere for 16 months.

Autumn came around ever so quickly and with it the September Church BBQ, Harvest Service and Auction and our annual Thanksgiving Service in conjunction with the Memorial Gardens. All went very well. We were able to open it up to a larger group and ticketed the services as needed. I must thank Simon McDowell for stepping into the breach for Harvest and the Thanksgiving services as I went down with Flu and was knocked off my feet just at the wrong time! Jon Homan and Nigel Lowe did a splendid job of auctioning all the gifts at Harvest time ... enabling us to make a much needed donation to SHOC.

It gave me great delight to welcome back the Gurkhas for a belated service of Remembrance in October. Now there are more grandchildren of soldiers attending than the originals but their commitment to God and the regiment was palpable. They filled the Hastings Chapel and enjoyed their time with us.

As Autumn made its way into Advent, we all hoped that the winter season would be kind to us. We made plans that were always 'Plan B' friendly, which meant that, as another strain of Covid began to take hold, we were able to keep our services going, our community engagements live and worship and evangelise as God had guided us to.

Carols on the Green returned and so did we - with a Pop up Nativity thoughtfully painted by Heather McDowell and erected next to the reindeer. So many - 100's in fact - of people engaged with it. All positively and reverently. Taking photos of themselves with the Holy family, and sneaking a peek at the baby Jesus (we had four - so we could keep swapping and cleaning them). The team of volunteers cajoled many to take photos of the service times and encouraged them all to try one. I think it worked!

Advent carols, Wassailing and the Christmas Eve services were well attended, considering the spiralling Covid cases. We asked people to choose one service to attend and on the whole people did, meaning all were well attended but kept as safe as they could be. So much cleaning was done ... and the one way systems helped with keeping folk far enough apart. The outdoor tea-hut at St Giles' was a real help too.

As our second year with Covid drew to a close, it was clear that as a Church community we have learnt how to adapt, become resistant to change and trust in God for His plans to come to fruition. Once again, all that we have done and will continue to do has to be first and foremost for His glory and the building of God's Kingdom. While we keep Loving God and Loving People the Lord seems to find ways for us to live out His purposes in and through us. Our ability to relate to our context has grown because we are listening and responding to the every day situations that come our way. For it is in these things that God can use us to further His Kingdom - by our witness AND grow us in our Faith.

This year has tested us, once again, but I hope you can see, by all that has been shared, that nothing has diminished the light of Christ shining out to the world from Stoke Poges Church. We have found and grown our abilities to ensure that God's will is done ... in person, online, by phone and through events in our community.

Thank you for striving to live out the love that God has shown to us in Christ Jesus.

Rev Natasha Brady May 2022.