

St Mark's, Armagh
Annual General Vestry Report
Tuesday 5th April 2022

Last year our Easter Vestry Meeting took place on March 22nd online as we were almost at the point of emerging from the Spring Parish lockdown. Having spent the spring 2021 with online worship and parish events via Zoom, it was lovely to gather again for worship on Good Friday evening. When we did so, we reopened with greater confidence than the previous summer, as we were able to continue with the procedures which had been in place previously. Thankfully since then our meeting together for worship has been unhindered and we have been able to take tiny steps towards easing restrictions and facilitate a greater sense of comfort as we meet together for worship and events in our Parish Hall. I would like to begin by paying tribute to our Parishioners for their desire to be together in worship and adhering to guidance with good heart and a desire to care for one another. It is my hope that parishioners and visitors have felt safe as they participated in worship and taken part in Parish activities. Further easing of guidelines will be discussed by our new Select Vestry and we look forward to the day when we can relax entirely. Hopefully that won't be much longer in coming.

During Holy Week and Easter of last year we offered an Easter Trail, giving people of all ages an opportunity to enjoy an outdoor walk, whilst contemplating the events of, and the significance of Holy Week and Easter. The reports of the Easter Trail were very positive and I have asked David to reinstall the cross which was located on the green outside of the Hall for Holy Week of this year.

Shortly after Easter last year, on 22nd April, our former Curate, Rev'd Geoff Hamilton was instituted as Rector of Annalong. Geoff and Jill seem to be very happy in their new parish. It is hard to believe that they are approaching the end of the first year. As Geoff departed, the Select Vestry were incredibly kind in permitting our Parish to join the Curacy appointment process for 2021. In the weeks that followed I met with a number of candidates, but I cannot tell you how delighted I was to go to the curacy appointment meeting on June 2nd and discover that we were going to receive the Rev'd Sarah Parkinson. I shall come back to Sarah in a few moments. But as Sarah was appointed here, it was also a delight to learn that our Deacon Intern, Rev'd Matthew Topley was appointed the nearby Parish of Drumglass. June 2nd was a good news day!

During May, as well as meeting potential curates, I was kept busy with the usual Parochial activities of Youth Fellowship, Book Club and House Group which were all still on Zoom at that stage. Wednesday night services resumed in church and the midweek service was repeated online on Fridays, a pattern that we maintained until the end of last year.

Last May we were also were involved in the 'Thy Kingdom Come' initiative which sadly had very few participants, but was again worth being part of. Prayer is never wasted, even if it offered by just a few.

During the late Spring and early summer months it was lovely to have some guest speakers in St Mark's which included a representative from Home for Good, an organisation which tries to motivate the Church to be responsive to the need for Foster Care and Adoption. And we also welcomed Rev'd Roger Thompson of CMSI, updating us on our link with Shyogwe Diocese.

Baptisms also began in Spring of last year and it seems that we have been regularly baptising children ever since!

On June 6th we hosted a Children's Day Service, albeit a bit scaled back from the norm followed by the customary Picnic at the Palace Demesne. The picnic was a fabulous opportunity for families to come together just to relax and spend time together. The sun shone and it was lovely to be able to get to know some new families to our church community.

During the second week of August last year, it was a great delight to host a Holiday Bible Club in our Parish again. Due to the continued concerns of Covid, the Holiday Bible Club, for the most part met outside. It worked incredibly well and with restricted numbers it was a very relaxed experience. It was just lovely to hear children's voices around the hall and just to be able to enjoy ministry with children again.

On Sunday August 29th, we were delighted to be able to host Sarah's Ordination Service. When Rev'd Graham Hare was ordained deacon in St Mark's, I was not sure if our church had accommodated an ordination to the Diaconate before. And likewise, I am not sure if an ordination to the Priesthood had ever taken place in St Mark's before. Sarah, you may well have been involved in a historic moment for our Parish! But Sarah and Daniel have brought so much encouragement to our parish and I can truly say that Sarah is a delight to work with. She is a very gifted preacher and thoughtfully prepares for all that she does. The 'Alive' women's group is her creation and I know from chatting to ladies who attend, including Claire, that it is a very friendly, relaxed and enjoyable initiative. Sarah is also doing a marvellous job in leading the House Group, as well as the usual hum drum ministry activities. Sarah's capability is remarkable. Her gifts are extensive. Above all I praise God for Sarah's presence amongst us. And I want to offer my sincere thanks to the outgoing Select Vestry for backing the appointment of a curate and indeed to thank Sarah and Daniel for their willingness to share amongst us.

During the weekend of September 17th – 19th we hosted our 'Refresh' Weekend, which was an initiative to try and encourage parishioners and friends to come back to church and enjoy being together again. Activities included a Treasure Hunt, Coffee Morning, Teddy Bears' Picnic, Le Mall 24 sponsored walk, outdoor games, and special Sunday services. Again, it was great to see life around the church grounds again and perhaps we might do something like it again this autumn as we begin a new term of activities.

Our eighth Parish Alpha Course commenced on 21st September and with new members and those revisiting the course, we believe that it was a fruitful Alpha course with questions

raised and hopefully some answers or reassurances offered. Alpha continues to be a blessing, irrespective of how many times we run it!

On Sunday 26th September, Sunday School reopened. This was a very significant step in our journey to some degree of normality again. With careful procedures in place, it was a great delight to have the children meeting again to learn about their faith together. It has become quite apparent that whilst most children have come back to Sunday School, the regularity of attendance is not what it used to be prior to Covid. New weekly patterns have developed in family homes and unfortunately it seems that Sunday School does not enjoy the priority it once had. Children or family members isolating has had significant impact on attendance. Sadly the number of small children entering the P1/P2 class has been disappointing. But the leaders continue to serve faithfully and give of their best and for that we can be sincerely grateful.

The 3rd weekend of October is our traditional time for Harvest Thanksgiving Services. Last year, our decorations consisted of a mixture of Food Bank donations and flowers, fruit and veg. It was lovely to have the 'harvest smell' back in the church even with what were more modest decorations. I think people were quite impressed nonetheless! Coupled with a Ladies Harvest Breakfast organised by Sarah and a team of helpers, it was a very encouraging weekend with great guest speakers and a joyful choir to help us give thanks to God for his goodness.

Having just referred to a Food Bank collection, I would like to thank all who have supported our appeals for the Food Bank all the way through the pandemic. Special thanks are to be extended to John McCann and Ian Millar for their help with the Drive Through Drop Off. Our parishioners have been more than generous with their support of the Food Bank. As a parish we have also supported Mission Organisations to more than 2020 amounts and have donated to Belfast Central Mission's Christmas Toy Appeal, Bishop's Appeal and the annual Diocesan Hospice Appeal. And just recently our Parish donated over £2000 to the Bishops' Appeal Ukraine Fund, as well as an unquantified sum to Habitat for Humanity's Ukraine Fund which was directly donated online. Thank you sincerely to all who support our Parish financially and help us to share what we have, as we have done in the past year.

On Tuesday, 9th November, 23 of our Parish' young people were confirmed in St Mark's. It was quite a logistical undertaking with covid restrictions to be applied, but it all seemed to go well and families were very kind in their comments. The preparation sessions were very enjoyable and being outdoors, they were definitely different!

On Sunday, 21st November, the annual Service of Light and Remembrance was held in St Mark's, during which families, whose loved ones' funerals were led by Parish Clergy during the year past, were especially remembered in prayer. We hope that this service was especially comforting to people whose opportunity to express grief was all the more difficult due to restrictions.

On Advent Sunday, 28th November, with the required permission of the Archbishop, we commenced using small communion cups at the weekly 8.30am Communion Service which has been meeting in the Crozier Hall. The resumption of receiving Holy Communion in both kinds, that is bread and wine, was welcomed by worshippers. On St Patrick's Day of this year, clergy received notification from the Archbishops of Armagh and Dublin, that the use of the common Holy Communion cup was permissible again. Some research undertaken has deemed that in today's context it is acceptably safe to do so again. In talking to some parishioners I have received some hesitancy in resuming the use of the shared Communion Chalice just yet! Using the common cup is something that as a Select Vestry we can talk about again. But as we have been using the individual cups, we are permitted to keep doing so, at least for some time.

I have already spoken of some of Sarah's initiatives since her arrival here in St Mark's, and a memorable one was the Christmas Market which took place on December 11th. Due to heavy rain, the market moved indoors, but thankfully with careful readjustments and the adaptability of our catering team, we were able to host what was a terrific morning. Again, it was good to have such a buzz around our Hall!

In the approach to Christmas, a special school assembly was uploaded to YouTube for use in classrooms of any of our local Primary Schools and a service was also uploaded especially for people in Nursing Homes. Carol Singing took place in front gardens of people's houses, gifts were delivered to housebound parishioners. With the vaccination programme in full flight there was a lesser degree of concern about Covid at Christmas, but large numbers of people were isolating still. The Sunday School Nativity Service was of a hybrid format having the Nativity itself been recorded and played during the service. Thanks again to Sarah, Christingles were also distributed during the Nativity Service which I know were appreciated. The evening Carol Service featured our Parish Choir who, whilst smaller in number, sang beautifully and really set a worshipful approach to celebrating Christmas.

Due to the implications of cleaning requirements, the annual Day of Prayer took place on Saturday, January 16th in an online format. Matters personal, local and global were upheld before the Lord in prayer.

2022 is a busy year for weddings in St Mark's and it was lovely to have a good attendance for each evening of our Marriage Preparation Course that took place over four nights in February and March. This I believe is a really important initiative and worth offering even in years when the uptake is small. Also, in recent months our Bowling Club, Marksmen and our Youth Club have reopened. The lights are on in this hall a lot more than they have been during 2021! And just last month, the First Thursday club reopened with the next meeting this Thursday. Opportunities are being recreated to enjoy fellowship with one another. Yet to reopen are Wheels & Squeals and Creche. We also need to think about the Bible Fellowship. However, one organisation that sadly won't reopen, at least for the foreseeable future, is our Parish Mothers' Union. Our Parish Branch of the Mothers' Union opened on 27th March 1914. Since then it has played a very active role in the life our Parish

and beyond. However, for a number of reasons the membership of the Mothers' Union felt that it shouldn't reopen. Attempts to revitalise it in recent years have been unsuccessful and sadly Covid has severely diminished its future viability. I know that many of us will be saddened by its closing, but maybe it can be rekindled one day.

Our Lent services this year focused upon our faith in the context of mental health. This series which concludes tomorrow night has been a thought proving experience and the discussion group that follows the service has been highly enjoyable.

We now look forward to a Holy Week akin to what we have enjoyed in pre Covid years. With lots planned for Holy Week including the Maundy Thursday meal and service, as well as the Good Friday 3 Hours Service, I hope that you share my looking forward to what should be a highly devotional Holy Week and joyful Easter.

It is a great joy to see our choir back in action, robed up and in the choir stalls. We really could do with some extra singers and trying to build up the leading of sung worship will be a focus for the term ahead. We continue to express our sincere appreciation to the team of organists that include :- Mrs Gillian Reaney, Mrs Janice Nicholl, Mrs Edna Mullan, Mr Graham Brown, as well as Clare and Mark Speers who ably lead our music group.

I also want to offer a public and very sincere thank you to Keith Ruddy for all of his help on the sound desk and to those involved in Live Streaming of services including our sons Matthew and Isaac, Mr Daniel Parkinson and Mr Albert Nicholl.

I would like to pay tribute to our outgoing Church Wardens, Mrs Sarah Peilow and Mr Robert Johnston, who have been more than helpful to Sarah, David and myself, and have offered consistent welcome to those attending services. Your willingness to offer your very best is truly appreciated and I know that you will very encourage your successors as you train them up this Sunday and next.

David, our Sexton continues to offer incredible diligence in serving our Parish as our Parish Sexton. He remains most committed to his work and is always working away in the background, more so than any of us can know. When he takes the very rare Sunday off, his absence is incredibly noticed! I fear that I take him for granted and perhaps I am not alone.

Since reopening, it appears that Sunday attendance is around $\frac{3}{4}$ of what it would have been prior to Covid. The matter of irregularity of worship and people isolating due to covid infection mentioned earlier in relation to Sunday School seems to be a significant factor. A priority for Sarah and I as we enter summer months has to be to reconnect with people who have drifted to the fringes of our Parish. Another factor for some of our older people especially, has been that some have found it difficult to be relaxed with other people again. The natural fear factor of Covid is still a very significant issue. Also, the reality is that during the past 2 years, many of our formerly active and yet older people have aged significantly. Not being able to park close to the church door and driving at night have become concerns

for many. With that in mind, we held the first of a monthly 11.30am Holy Communion Service this morning. This will take place on the first Tuesday of the month and hopefully will include a light lunch afterwards in time. Sarah and I were most pleased to have 12 people attend the service this morning, most of whom have not been attending church since the Spring of 2020.

So, with the looking forward, Sarah, Caroline and I took some time recently to have a think about where we are at present and what kinds services and initiatives that we might like to develop in the future. There is a great desire to see our Junior Choir back in action at Family Services and Freddos were mentioned too. Concerns mentioned included the age profile of our parish, low expectations and a prevailing half heartedness to faith and the service of God. These are by no means exclusive to St Mark's, but they are legitimate concerns. Priorities identified include reconnecting, the development of a Men's Ministry and I know that Sarah has plans for 'Alive and Active' this summer. We thought about the possibility of arranging a fifth Sunday of the Month contemporary Praise Service, or possibly something different for monthly evening service. We are concerned by apparent decline of a volunteer base within our parish and the need to encourage and equip new leaders.

After Easter, there will be the possibility to plan into the summer and beyond. Plans will include some special events to commemorate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee during the first weekend of June. But more long term, we feel that we need to refocus a little as we enter a Post Covid reality. We will need help as we seek to serve in new ways and we are more than open to ideas coming from you and your fellow parishioners. We pray and seek together in faith.

For a number of reasons our Parish Readers, Ms Barbara Wilson and Mrs Adele Geddis have not been involved in public worship of late, but we very much hope that both of them will be robed and at the front again soon. I know that they are willing and want to assure parishioners that we can look forward to their involvement again. Adele was also commissioned as a Parish Visitor in St Mark's last September and it is hoped that it won't be long until our Parish Visitors are back in action.

Of course, we cannot forget the continued and deeply valued contribution of Very Rev'd Robert Townley, who offers faithful service in leading us in worship and preaching from the Word of God. Robert's prayerful and thoughtful preparation and quality of preaching was evidenced just very recently on Mothering Sunday.

As a Select Vestry we have undertaken a number of initiatives including the updating of lighting in and outside of the church to LED lighting resulting in lower electricity usage which is highly desirable for both cost and environmental reasons. Electrical testing has been undertaken to parish properties and any necessary adjustments undertaken to ensure necessary compliance. The lighting conductor to the church has been improved to offer better protection. Some improvements were undertaken to the curatage including the

replacement of the garage roofs and removal of some trees. A problem with the church boiler was repaired in time for last winter. We are undertaking a legal exercise to confirm our title to the property at the Mall entrance to our Parish. We are also committed to improving the Church toilet area, something that I hope will happen soon. We are also intending to create a simple garden area between the Windsor Room end of the Hall and the Orange Hall. This is an exercise that we hope to link with the Queen's Platinum Jubilee this year and is intentionally designed for ease of management and benefit to wildlife. We also hope to repaint the Mall Gates and we are also undertaking the installation of a desk in the church gallery, adjacent to the Sound Desk to accommodate a computer system for livestreaming. This desk will be installed in memory of a very faithful and fondly remembered parishioner, Mr John Doogan.

As a Parish we were very saddened by the passing of a number of very faithful parishioners during the past year. Those who died in the 2021 calendar year are noted in our Parish Financial Report. One of those we remember tonight is Mrs Carol McMordie, who offered incredible service to our Select Vestry having been our Hon Secretary for 27 years, from 1991 to 2018. Presumably Carol served on the Select Vestry for some years prior to her appointment as Secretary. We miss Carol as indeed we grieve the passing of many other faithful parishioners who gave so much in the service of this Church including Mrs Vicky Baxter, a very long term member of our Parish Choir and Mr George Clarke, someone who undertook numerous practical projects to our Parish Properties at the request of our Select Vestry.

I would like to thank all of our Select Vestry members for their endeavours during the past year. Thank you to our Hon Secretary, Mrs Wendy Davison for her very efficient administrative endeavours and the incredibly rapid circulation of minutes after a Select Vestry Meeting. Thank you to Mr Arnold Courtney for his continued wise counsel in the application of our Parish finances. Our Glebe Wardens have been rather busy this year and have offered their characteristic attentiveness to our Parish Properties. Thank you to Don and to Don. And indeed to all of our Select Vestry Members, thank you one and all. As I have said before, you are a pleasure to work with and our Parish is very faithfully served by its Select Vestry.

Back to the Staff Team, and I have already paid tribute to Sarah and to David, and now I must mention Caroline for all of her endeavours in the Office. It is great having Caroline back in the office after last year's working from home. I thank God for her organisational gifts and the good humour that she brings to our staff team. A few months ago, a fellow Rector asked me for Caroline's Job Description because his Select Vestry was hoping to appoint a Parish Administrator. I had to ask Caroline to make a list of her duties. It is quite extensive! Caroline, thank you for your passion for your job and willingness to undertake all kinds of duties that enables the ministry of this church.

As I conclude, as always I would like to do so by thanking my family for their patience and their support. I know I couldn't do what I do without their patience, help and love.

But above all, may we thank our Lord Jesus, who as we thought about earlier, laid down his life for our freedom and gives us the collective privilege of service, and knowing Him as Lord and friend. May everything we do be for his glory.