

St Mark's, Armagh
Annual General Vestry Report
Tuesday 8th April 2025

Reading : Romans 12v3-8

In his book 'Love your Church, Tony Merida wrote :-

"Followers of Christ are not spectators in the church, but servants in the church. As a Christian you shouldn't think of your church as 'the place where I listen to sermons' but as 'the place where I serve.' To be sure, listening to sermons is important. But church members are contributors to that ministry – and contributing involves giving your time, talent, and treasure for the health and growth of your church."

As I work my way through my diary each year, recollecting what we have offered in worship and service to God during the past year, I am reminded of how much what we do rely upon the faithful service of each person involved. The willingness of many faithful people offering their gifts and abilities for the work of the Church is critical. What we offer as a church cannot be achieved by any individual. Yes, leaders are required, but collectively we serve better together because as Paul explained ⁴"For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us."

By the grace of God each of us has gifts that can be used for the glory of God here in this place and it is a privilege. As we serve in the ministry of the Church I think it is important to remember who it is for and why we do this. Our church logo little mission statement reminds us "Serving together for Christ's Kingdom". As we recall what has been done and think about what we can do, may we do so for the Kingdom of God here and beyond.

As usual the past year has involved much activity and which I shall try and summarize as quickly as I can during this annual report.

In the week following last year's Easter Vestry we journeyed through Holy Week and Easter which included the Maundy Thursday Service and meal, as well as the 3 Hours Service, the Diocesan Easter Dawn Service at the Argory, and the breakfast that followed in the Crozier Hall.

May is usually a quieter month in the Parish and as we moved into June we held our Children's Day which was followed by a sunny afternoon in the Palace Grounds for a Parish Picnic. On 23rd June what is now, the annual Co Armagh Memorial Wall Service of Remembrance took place during the afternoon of the 4th Sunday of June and involved the

Co. Armagh Phoenix Group. At this service there was a dedication of a new Standard for the Northern Ireland Association of Retired Prison Officers.

On June 25th this hall was a hive of activity as we hosted our Parish Fete which also included a mini Auction ,ably overseen by our guest auctioneer Mr Kenneth Lathem. This was a very enjoyable day and involved many of our Parishioners in all kinds of activities inside and outside of the hall.

Having completed their exams young people from our Parish journeyed to Newcastle for an evening of end of term fun involving games on Murlough Beach, chips for dinner and the dodgems. It was on our way to Newcastle on 25th June, that I received a text from Sarah to let me know that her lovely baby daughter, Margot had been born! Naturally, as a parish we were delighted to hear of Margot's safe arrival and the news was joyfully shared in the days that followed.

On 28th June young people from our Parish, along with some friends, travelled to Portglenone to attend Summer Madness. The group was a little smaller than previous years, however as usual Summer Madness proved to be very significant opportunity for those who came along. We are actively seeking to build a group to take part this year and please do, if you can, encourage young people along.

With Sarah being on Clergy Parent Sabbatical (clergy term for Maternity leave), and another key leader for Holiday Bible Club, Mrs Hannah Irvine having a new born baby, some of our younger leaders really had to step up as the Backpackers Holiday Bible Club took place in our Hall during the week 12th August. Our younger leaders were brilliant and really shone in the opportunities that they were able to grasp. We had another great week of summer mission fun and we are very grateful to Clare Speers who undertook the key leader role, and served in this role magnificently.

The annual cricket match with our friends from The Mall Presbyterian Church also took place during August and as always was a really lovely evening of fun and friendship was enjoyed together.

September saw the reactivation of many of our Parish activities. A new addition to our Parish Programme during the last year has been the development of our Men's Group which is an informal group offering a meeting, or an activity, each month for men to come along to. We began last May and have had several really enjoyable events which have attracted some teenaged men too! So far evenings have included a trip to Craigavon for dinner and bowling, we have been here for a Youth Club styled games night finishing up with an epic game of dodge ball, we have been to the Kingspan Stadium to see Ulster win a rugby match, Mr Dean McCullough joined us to share about being a Christian Footballer and last month we went for dinner at 'On the Hoof'! Our plans for May and June include Go Karting and Fishing. So, if gents of any age would like to join in what we are doing at any time, we would love to see them.

Going back to September last, we very much enjoyed our annual Parish BBQ followed by a short quiz and then in October we hosted a Day of Prayer for peace in places enduring the suffering of conflict. The 3rd weekend of October is our traditional time for Harvest Thanksgiving Service and we welcomed our guest preachers; Sr Valerie Thom, Rev'd Andrew Irwin and Rev'd William Orr. The Saturday morning Ladies Harvest Breakfast involved Mrs Doreen Speers, who has a few relatives here in St Mark's and is a Diocesan Reader for Down and Dromore Dioceses. It was a very encouraging weekend added to by a joyful choir to help us give thanks to God for his goodness. The Harvest Decorations include food bank items and our monthly collections continue on Saturday mornings outside of this hall. Our parishioners continue to be more than generous with their support of the Food Bank for which we recently received a special certificate to mark a very significant milestone in our collections since we began our monthly collections. The list of our annual Mission and Charity Contributions is offered in our financial report, but added to this is our annual Christmas Toy Appeal donations which were distributed via Belfast Central Mission. I believe that ours is a generous Parish and for that I am continually thankful.

November's activities included the annual Shopping Trip to Kildare which I know many of the ladies from our Parish and their friends looked forward to. Thanks are extended to again to Florence for arranging this valued day

Also in November, we also held our annual Service of Light and Remembrance, during which families, whose loved ones' funerals were led by Parish Clergy during the year past, were especially remembered in prayer. Caring for those who are bereaved is a priority of our Parish and I again wish to offer my sincere appreciation to our Parish Nurse, Dr Bob Brown, and to those who assisted him in offering our third Bereavement Journey course during January and February of this year. Bob continues to offer the weekly Café Hope which is intended for people struggling with loss, of any kind, to be able to come along and know that there is a listening ear here on Wednesday afternoons. In what we offer, as a Parish we continue to hope that we can encourage a sense of support, comfort and hope amidst the sorrow and struggles of loss.

Loss indeed has been a significant experience for us as a Parish in the past year, and much more so for the loved ones who have been personally bereaved. As you will see in your Parish Report quite a number of very much loved parishioners have passed away since our last meeting. One such member was of course Ms Barbara Wilson whose funeral service took place just after Christmas. I particularly mention Barbara due to her significant roles in our Parish as a Parish Reader and a Parish Visitor. Barbara, and the other people listed in our Parish Report as they are no longer with us are deeply missed, and as a Parish we grieve their loss together.

As listed in our Parish Report 15 young people were confirmed during November of last year. They were a lovely bunch and I am very grateful to Mrs Valerie Cooke who sat in on the classes to assist me with my safeguarding requirements.

A massive event for us during December was of course our 'Joy to the World' Christmas Tree Festival. I have to say, I was so pleased with what we were able to offer during the weekend of 5th – 8th December. Our Parishioners, and friends of our Parish, were incredibly creative in the decorating of over 70 trees each according to specific Bible passages from Genesis to Revelation, all contributing to the story of why the Christian Gospel is 'Joy to the World'. The Amber rated Storm Darragh did create difficulties for us on the Saturday of the Festival Weekend, but our team adapted magnificently and enabled the show to go on, despite the intensity of the storm.

With additional Christmas Decorations gifted to the Church for the festival, our church looked truly beautiful for Christmas and it was a special treat to again host the Adoro Choir at Christmas. Again, the concert was a sell out and a night of the most beautiful Christmas music which was enjoyed by all who came. In the approach to Christmas, an annual treat is our Sunday School Nativity Service and the choir's contributions to our Nine Lessons and Carols Service. Carol Singers were also out and about in the local community in the approach to Christmas.

Having held our annual Covenant Service on the Sunday before New Year's Day, the RSA Scripture Union's annual Celebrate Service soon followed, as did our annual Day of Prayer. I have to say I always love the Day of Prayer. Again, it was a very special occasion where people came in good number to pray about the themes personal, local and global encouraged by our displays.

As well as the Bereavement Journey, Alpha reappeared in our programme of activities in January. It was lovely to be meeting in the hall again for Alpha and I know from what people have told me after, that there was great personal significance for at least some of those who took part.

On 1st February, Sarah returned to ministry in our Parish following her Parental Sabbatical. As you will have heard from her report, she hit the ground running again, with her particular personal responsibilities for Marriage Preparation, the Alive Women's Group, Home Group and The Well. Truly, it is great to have Sarah back in action again, and I know our parishioners, like I, appreciate all that she offers both on Sundays and during the week.

In his report, like last year I expect that the Treasurer will again highlight our a need for financial expediency. To help reduce the deficit, the fundraising committee were busy last year and do have some events planned for this year. In truth after some big events that took place last year, there isn't the same degree of big earning events planned for this year. What we do have in mind are :- The Parish BBQ will be on 11th September, a Fashion Show on the 9th October. The Adoro Concert will again take place in the approach to Christmas. A Murder Mystery event is being planned for November. We also have a Flower Festival in mind for the Spring of 2026.

As we are approaching Holy Week the Parish Choir have been practising on Wednesday nights and we are incredibly grateful to Mrs Edna Mullan for her continued leading of choir practices. As well as Edna we would like to thank our team of musicians who lead us in our sung worship which currently include :- Mrs Janice Nicholl and Mr Graham Brown, as well as Mrs Clare and Mr Mark Speers who lead our music group. Thank you to choir and worship group members for their willing contribution to our services.

Speaking of leading Worship, on Saturday 1st and Sunday 2nd of March a good number of young people greatly enjoyed taking part in the Diocesan Youth Mini Residential in Co. Fermanagh. The highlight for me as one of the leaders was seeing Izzie Speers, Alfie Abbott and Isaac Kingston leading the sung worship during the worship and teaching sessions. They were just brilliant and it was lovely to see a new generation of worship leaders really shining as they served.

As Parishioners will be very aware, this year we have a number of young people from our Parish travelling with teams serving in Romania and India. We have five young people going to Romania to serve with the Diocesan Habitat for Humanity Team and two young men who have been selected to be part of the Royal School Armagh's Asha Team serving in the slums of New Delhi. I think it is really encouraging to have so many young people from our parish offering to serve in these teams. We have been actively fundraising over recent months and the last of our planned events will take place this Thursday. Tickets are still available! I am also travelling to Romania as a leader, but don't count myself in the 'young person' category!

To all Parish Organisation leaders, thank you one and all. The recruitment of volunteers in all walks of life is a significant issue. I am more than grateful to everyone who sacrifices their time and offers their gifts for the activities of this Parish. If I may, I would like to offer a big 'thank you' to Mrs Lorraine Thornbury who has faithfully and very effectively led our GLOW Youth Club Team over many years, but has 'retired' from the role as of the last event on Friday past. During the year she had indicated her intention, but in truth I had been in denial that it would happen, until it actually did happen on Friday past! Lorraine is a great organiser and we will miss her at the helm of Glow. And so, we are on the look out for a new main leader!

Moving on to the Select Vestry, I would like to thank Mr Ian Millar for his diligent work as a Parish Hon Secretary. We continue to express appreciation to Mr Arnold Courtney for his continued wise counsel in the application of our Parish finances. Our Glebe Wardens have been busy as usual 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 Vestry.

As a Select Vestry we have had a number of projects that we have discussed and attended to during the past year. I reported to you last year that we were concerned about the need

for ventilation in the void below the flooring under pews in the church. You may have noticed some brass coloured grills that have been fitted to offer this ventilation and the humidity in the void is being monitored. We are waiting to see if this approach has been sufficiently effective. The church boiler needed some work undertaken and we are glad to say that this has been completed and being honest, on more than one occasion since I have sneakily turned the thermostat down by a small amount as I have felt too warm, especially with wearing robes.

At the front of the Rectory the tarmac needed to be resurfaced and this has been done.

The Mall entrance to our church continues to cause us concern and unfortunately we have not been able to remedy the difficulties that we are facing there yet, but it is still very much on our agenda. The proposed development at No. 5 St Mark's Place is one which we continue to offer resistance to and at an informal hearing of the Planning Appeals Commission representation was offered on behalf of ourselves and local residents.

I would like to pay tribute to our outgoing Church Wardens, Mr Ivan Hamilton and Mr Gregory McCarten, who have who have been incredibly attentive and conscientious during their whole term of office. I know that you will very much encourage your successors as your train them up this Sunday and next and I know that you are very grateful to anyone who has stepped in when you needed a Sunday off duty.

Mr David Mansbridge, continues to offer incredible diligence as our Parish Sexton and we are immensely grateful to him for all of his work in keeping our Church and Hall looking so well. With David's agreement his hours have been reduced to enable us to pay for contractors to attend to the grass in the church yard. What we have in place seems to be working really well and our church continues to be kept to a very high standard.

Again, I would like to commend Sarah's work during the past year and am so grateful for all that she brings to our Parish's ministry and it is lovely to see Margot flourishing as well.

And of course, I would like to say a huge thank you to Caroline. Caroline does much more than is expected of her and works incredibly hard for the well being of our Parish. Much of what she does is beyond even my knowledge and we owe her a great deal of gratitude.

As I conclude, as always I would like to do so by thanking my family for their patience and their support. It is not easy being the wife or children of a Rector, but chip in so faithfully and it very much feels like they are part of the team.

But above all, may we thank our Lord Jesus, who gives us the gifts for service, and the privilege of knowing his love and helping in the advancement of his Kingdom and here and beyond. May our intention be to worship and serve together for Christ's Kingdom.