

St Mark's, Armagh
Annual General Vestry Report
Tuesday 28th March 2023

Reading : Philippians 2v5-11

This year at our 3 Hours Service, the theme that I will be hanging our thoughts upon is from v8 “... *he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!*”

Serving in a church community involves sacrifice, whether of time, energy and even finance. But sacrifice for the glory of God and in his service, is the way of Jesus and should be the way of his disciples.

Tonight a number of people will be thanked, as indeed should all of you for giving up your night to be here at this meeting. Let us remember who all of this is for, the one who “... *humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!*”

Last year our Easter Vestry Meeting took place on April 5th, the Tuesday before Holy Week as is our custom and as we are doing this evening.

Last year we returned to something of normality for Holy Week and Easter including the return of the Maundy Thursday Service and meal, the 3 Hours Service, the Easter Dawn Service at the Argory and the breakfast that followed in the Crozier Hall. It was great to be fully back to the norms for Holy Week and Easter, which was added to in the weeks that followed with a United Service with our Methodist and Presbyterian friends, and a Healing Service in our church.

Children's Day, and the picnic that followed the service, was moved forward a Sunday due to celebrations that we observed for Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee. With a Parish BBQ on Wednesday June 1st, an Afternoon Tea on Saturday June 4th and a special Service during the evening of June 5th, the Platinum Jubilee weekend was one of celebration that was accompanied by fitting sunshine.

A welcome return to the approach of the summer was our annual cricket match with our friends from The Mall Presbyterian Church. This year's game was finely balanced right up to the last over when Stephen Little hit a six which resulted in the ball being lost forever in a hedge, before he then hit a four to clinch the game. As always it was a really lovely evening of fun and friendship together.

On Sunday 19th June a table for the computer equipment in the Church Gallery was dedicated in memory of a most faithful parishioner and Sunday School Teacher of 28th years, Mr John Doogan. Moving to more recent months, a tree was planted near the Victoria Street Gate of St Mark's, where a prayer of thanksgiving for the memory of Mrs

Carol McMordie was offered on Sunday 15th January. Carol was also a very faithful parishioner who served as Hon Secretary to this Select Vestry for 27 years.

On June 26th Dr Bob Brown was commissioned as a Parish Nurse for our Parish. As you will know, Bob has been a Select Vestry member for some years and changes in his working life has opened the possibility for his to serve as a voluntary Parish Nurse on Wednesdays. I know from speaking to parishioners that Bob's assistance has been most helpful as he seeks to help parishioners find the information that they desire with regards to health concerns, how to better navigate the health care system and to promote healthier lifestyles. Bob also hosted a Seniors' Lunch in February. An particular initiative which Bob led so ably and which offered such profound benefit was The Bereavement Journey Course which began in January of this year. Sarah and I assisted Bob with delivering the programme and the feedback from participants was amazing. The six Thursday nights, and the follow up day away, were incredibly beneficial with participants speaking of the positive impact the programme made to their lives. Mindful of those who were disappointed to miss out on the Bereavement Journey earlier this year, we have offered the opportunity of attending another course after Easter. If demand is there to run with it after Easter we will do so, but it is definitely in our intentions for early 2024.

On July 1st we returned to Summer Madness which was located at a new venue in Portglenone. It was great to return to the outdoors, the portaloos and the familiar smell of the Big Top! We had a group of around 20 young people and leaders and again it was a time of immense spiritual significance, as well all as a lot of fun. We look forward to returning on June 30th of this year.

During Summer Madness last year, I nipped home to attend a service of farewell to Rev'd Tony Davidson from 1st Armagh Presbyterian Church. Tony has been a tremendous friend to St Mark's and we were all sorry to see him go, but I know that he is enjoying his retirement and we continue to wish he and Christine well for the future.

On 31st July a Service of Remembrance took place in St Mark's to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the conclusion of Operation Banner. The Co. Armagh Phoenix Group have expressed a desire to hold an annual service of remembrance, but we have great practical difficulty in accommodating this service annually during summer months. We are in discussion with the Phoenix Group regarding this and we really hope that a mutually acceptable date for an annual service can be found.

The week beginning Monday 8th August was Holiday Bible Club week. Under Sarah's leadership this was a week blessed with incredible sunshine and was a lot of fun. I think we had forgotten how exhausting a 5 day Holiday Bible Club can be, but we had a great time with lovely and enthusiastic children who attended. We very much look forward to another week of Holiday Bible Club during the week beginning August 7th.

Having celebrated Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee earlier in the year, it was with great sadness for our nation to learn of her passing on September 8th. Amidst a

period of national mourning we hosted a Service of Prayer and Remembrance on Sunday 18th September, the eve of her Funeral Service. It is our intention to hold a special service to commemorate the Coronation of King Charles III at 7pm on Sunday 3rd May.

The 'Refresh' Weekend was smaller in scale to the previous year during which we had a special GLOW Youth night, a Family Service and a Favourite Hymns Service. My intention to undertake a 60K challenge, instead of the previous years' Le Mall 24, had to be postponed to the Harvest Weekend due to an injury! Nonetheless it was completed in modified form and just over £2000 was raised and divided between Parish Funds and the work of Reach Mentoring.

Our ninth Parish Alpha Course commenced on 29th September but unfortunately with very small uptake on this occasion. After a few weeks we discussed whether to keep going, which we decided to do, and I am glad that we did. After Easter, those of us who organise Alpha will take some time to pray and have a chat about what we might do this Autumn. Any ideas are more than welcomed!

Last year I reported that it seemed that Sunday School did not seem to enjoy the priority it once had. Unfortunately, particularly in the younger age groups this remains the case. I visited Sunday School during early January it seemed very apparent that attendance in the older age groups was much better than the younger half of Sunday School. I want to offer continued tribute to Christine Somerville and all of the Sunday School team for all that they do and ask that you join me in praying that parents will encourage better participation. I know that I am moving forward in the time line when I make reference to our Confirmation on Sunday past. The young people involved were a lovely bunch and they were a pleasure to lead through the preparation process. I pray that they will very much feel at home in Sunday worship and will grow in faith and understanding as part of our congregation. A lovely development on Sunday mornings of late has been the Youth Alpha course which Michael Dickson has led alongside a rota of assisting volunteers. This was advertised for young people of post confirmation age and it has been attended by a small group of young men in school years 11 and 12. One of the lads attending is my son, Isaac, and I am hearing very good reports. So, thank you Michael for taking on this initiative.

The 3rd weekend of October is our traditional time for Harvest Thanksgiving Services and again we combined our traditional decorations with items of food for the food bank. Last year's Harvest Services involved a few familiar faces in Rev'd Graham Hare, a former Deacon Intern here and now Rector of Drumragh with Mountfield Parishes in Omagh, as well as a former Curate, Rev'd Geoff Hamilton, now Rector of Annalong. It was great to see the lads back in the pulpit, as well as my good friend, Rev'd Joanne Megarrell, Rector of Moira. A Saturday morning Ladies Harvest Breakfast was organised by Sarah and a team of helpers and involved Rev'd Clare Kakuru from Maghaberry. It was a very encouraging weekend added to by 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 monthly Drive Through Drop Off appeals for the Food. 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 you will see from your 2022 Financial Report, as a parish we increased our support of Mission Organisations to more than 2021 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 £2000 to the Bishops' Appeal for Turkey and Syria following the recent earthquakes. 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.

During November, Karen Braithwaite facilitated a CAP Money Course which we thought would be especially pertinent during the Cost of Living Crisis, but didn't attract as much interest as we thought it would! I know Sarah went along to support the initiative and she was very impressed with Karen's delivery of the programme and we are grateful to Karen for wholeheartedly offering the programme even with a small number of participants.

Saturday November 12th saw the return of the annual Shopping Trip to Kidlare which I know many of the ladies from our Parish and their friends looked forward to. We are grateful to Florence Magwood for her willingness to organise another trip which was very much enjoyed by those who travelled.

On Sunday, 20th 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. As continue to hope that this service offers comfort and reassurance of hope to people who have been bereaved.

On the evening of Thursday 1st December this hall and to the front of it was jam packed with people of all ages for our Christmas Market. Having this event in the evening and being able to use inside and out made for a very successful evening. The Christmas Market was organised by Sarah and like everything that she is involved in, Sarah put her heart and soul into it, and I was just delighted to see how her hard work paid off.

The approach to last Christmas was more akin to what we would have regarded as normal in the past as it was our turn to host the Lisnally School Carol Service and the annual Armstrong Primary Carol Service returned to St Mark's. On the Sunday before Christmas, which was on a Sunday (a minister's dream scenario), the Sunday School offered a live Nativity Service and the choir sang beautifully at our Nine lessons and Carols, really setting a worshipful approach to celebrating Christmas. The Carol Singers were also out and about in the community in the approach to Christmas. During September past the Royal School Armagh's Speech night returned to St Mark's and in January the Royal's Scripture Union Celebrate Service also took place.

After a covid induced break, our annual Day of Prayer returned to within the walls of St Mark's on 28th January. This year it seemed to be very significant with a constant flow of

people right up until closing time and personally, I had the opportunity to pray with several people, some of whom I didn't really know, which was very special. It was a very encouraging day.

2023 is quieter for wedding than last year, perhaps indicating that we have caught up upon all of the Covid delayed weddings. Sarah has been leading Marriage Preparation Course during this month and will conclude on Thursday night. This I continue to believe is a really important initiative and it is really good that we are in a position to be able to offer it.

Another initiative that I believe has been a great blessing has been the offering of a monthly Tuesday morning Holy Communion Service, particularly intended for older parishioners. After Covid some faithful parishioners were telling me that they found difficulty in parking close enough to the door on Sundays at 10.30am and that they didn't like driving in the dark to the evening service. So, with such folk particularly in mind we began our monthly service on the morning of last year's Easter Vestry and during the autumn we began to follow the service with a light lunch in the Crozier Hall. It has been lovely to see this little service grow and see some of our most faithful parishioners gather for worship and in fellowship afterwards. I would like to thank Christine Morrow for preparing the lunches, as well as those she has recently added to her team due to the growth of this monthly congregation.

On the second Sunday in February a new monthly evening service began here in this room. The Well is a contemporary Café Church style service with modern hymns led by the parish worship group. With refreshments combined with a relaxed atmosphere the past two Well Services have attracted more than 30 worshippers and from teenagers to I'm not sure that I should say! This has been an initiative led by Sarah which I am absolutely delighted about. The Well coincides with our Evening Service and as it is very different to what is offered in church, it has not had a negative impact to our Sunday evening congregation when it meets. Hopefully The Well will flourish and encourage worship and discipleship amongst our congregation.

Most of our parish organisations are running well, but we still need a leader for Wheels and Squeals. As yet we haven't found someone to be the key person to run it, so any suggestions would be welcomed! Also, as a Select Vestry we have talked about how we would love to see the Catering Team reform and be on call for Funeral Teas, but as yet we have been unable to find a suitable person. Again, all suggestions are welcomed!

To help alleviate the shortfall of income over expenditure which the Treasurer has spoken of this evening, a fund raising group has formed and initiatives that are being developed include an Afternoon Tea, the Parish BBQ, a Fashion Show, a Christmas Concert, the publication of a booklet recording memories from younger years and a Parish calendar. Initiatives like these are helpful, but as one very wise parishioner indicated at a Fund Raising meeting, at some point we are going to have to consider some kind of Stewardship Campaign to help raise giving to our Parish Funds. Amidst a Cost of Living Crisis, this needs

to be carefully approached and to be honest, I hate talking about money! But the time is coming for a carefully considered response.

So, apart from financial matters, what is next?

Last year I reported that our congregation's attendance is at around 75% of pre Covid levels and disappointingly that is still the case. What we can do to encourage more frequent attendance we are trying to figure out. A clear target area for us has to be families with children in younger years. As you know Holy Week and Easter is a very busy time for us. After Easter, we shall regroup and consider what we might try and do next, particularly with a focus on younger families.

As well as the initiatives already mentioned, a new project that is developing is part of the Diocesan 'Flourish' initiative instigated by the Archbishop. The idea of Flourish is to encourage parishes to consider how we can use what we have to contribute to a better environment. We have a piece of land between the Windsor Room end of this Hall and the back of the Orange Hall that is currently basically redundant and we are exploring what might be done with this portion of land to enhance the beauty of our grounds and contribute to an environmental benefit. A meeting to help push this forward is planned for after the midweek service on Wednesday April 19th and all ideas will be very much welcomed.

With regards to teams in our Parish, thankfully, our Parish Readers, Ms Barbara Wilson and Mrs Adele Geddis, having had to step aside for a time on health grounds are back in action, participating in leading Sunday worship again. It is lovely to have both ladies leading us in worship and in prayer again.

At present, for health reasons Very Rev'd Robert Townley, is taking a break from leading worship and preaching in St Mark's, but continues to encourage us faithfully from the pew and in his comments after services. Thankfully Robert has made excellent progress since becoming unwell last November and we very much look forward to Robert's participation up front in church, but until that time, we wish him continued restoration and good health.

Sadly, during the past year two members of our ministry team are no longer with us, but one day, we will meet again. We continue to give thanks for Mr Alex Stinson, who was a faithful member of our Parish for all of this life and served diligently when able as a Parish Visitor. We also give thanks to God for the faithful service of Mr Ronnie Watt, a Tyrone man by birth, but a Parishioner since the mid 1970s and who served as a Parish reader in St Mark's from 1987 until 2020. Both men offered consistent willing service to their Lord and his Church and their example should continue to inspire us today.

I have already mentioned Dr Bob Brown's active service as a Parish Nurse and I am very pleased to be able to tell you that on June 18th he will be commissioned as a Diocesan Reader. As such he will be able to preach in our pulpit and indeed be available to the

Diocese to lead services and preach in churches wherever he can be of assistance. We wish Bob every blessing for this added dimension to his current ministry.

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 leading choir practices in recent times. 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 ably lead our music group. Thank you to choir and worship group members for their willing contribution to our services.

I also want to offer a public and very sincere thank you to Keith Ruddy for all of his help on the sound desk, now ably assisted by his daughter Chloe. I would also like to thank those involved in Live Streaming of services including our sons Matthew and Isaac, Katie Dickson and Emily Dunwoody. We continue to receive positive feed back regarding our livestream. A family from Newcastle in England have been in touch and it seems that they are regular viewers. And closer to home it is nice to visit homes in our parish where people with mobility difficulties live and are able to tune in for Sunday worship. Nursing homes have also availed of this facility which is also very heartening. We have sought costs for upgrading what is a very basic set up that we have at present. But our limited parish finances are limiting some of the projects that we would like to undertake, which also include the upgrading of signs to the entrances of our church grounds and the renovation of the church toilet area.

During the past year, for very valid reasons, Mrs Wendy Davison stepped down from service on the Select Vestry and therefore concluded her term as Hon Secretary. Wendy was a very efficient secretary whose Minutes were often in our email inbox before we got home from the meeting! We are very thankful to Wendy for her endeavours as Hon Secretary to the Select Vestry and are also very grateful to Mr Ian Millar for stepping into this very important role in the life of our Parish.

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 Select Vestry.

As a Select Vestry our biggest project of late has been the repair of a sewer running from the church to the Victoria Street entrance. This was a significant undertaking that also involved the resurfacing of tarmac outside of the church office. Another significant job which we hope has reached its conclusion has been the repair to the roof above the main entrance to the Crozier Hall which was a long standing problem. The Select Vestry kindly agreed to the installation of a new shower in the Rectory which had to be replaced due to ongoing leakage issues. There is some work being undertaken at the Curatage to improve

its heating and warmth retention. We are continuing with a legal exercise to confirm our title to the property at the Mall entrance to our Parish. The Mall Gates have been repainted, but already indicated, some projects have been paused and will be undertaken as funds permit.

I would like to pay tribute to our outgoing Church Wardens, Mr Uel Megarity and Mr Gordon Stewart, who have most 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 your train them up this Sunday and next.

Mr David Mansbridge, continues to offer incredible diligence in serving his Lord and his church as our Parish Sexton. The Select Vestry Minutes of Monday 8th November 1982 record his appointment to the position of Parish Sexton, therefore during November past David passed his 40th anniversary in this vital role. David knows everyone and is known by everyone. His dedication to his work is plan for all to see. We praise God for David and continue to be incredibly thankful for all that he does.

We are nearing the end as I thank staff colleagues here in St Mark's. Truly it is a great blessing to work daily with David, Sarah and Caroline.

Sarah continues to offer so much to the ministry and life of our Parish. Holiday Bible Club, the Christmas Market, House Group, The Well, Alive and Marriage Preparation have all been initiatives which she has particularly led and devoted so much energy and enthusiasm to. Sarah is an excellent planter and over the past year and a half she has learned so much about the practicalities of ministry. I am sure her head spins at times, but I have great confidence in Sarah and know that the Lord is really using her in our midst for the work of his Kingdom. Thank you Sarah, keep going, and as a church community let us encourage her.

Caroline told me just recently that she has been Parish Administrator for almost 18 years! Like David, even after many years service, she puts her whole heart into her role. This morning she was grappling with getting Pinnacles ready for printing this weekend and I have to say, I think Pinnacles is a terrific publication and for Caroline it is something of a labour of love. Our new photocopier which the Select Vestry kindly purchased in 2021 means that pretty much everything is printed in house, including the parish financial report. Caroline works incredibly hard and I would like to thank her for her endeavour, good humour and listening ear when parishioners call into the office. We'd be lost without her!

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 they cope really well!

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.