

Team Vicar's Report

'It's not so much that the church has a mission, it's that the mission of God has a church'

Those are the words of Alan Hirsh, an Australian author and expert in church growth, and his point is that it's God who sets the agenda, it's his mission; God who is already at work, often in overlooked and unexpected of places. Our job therefore as a church is to identify where he is already at work and to join in.

We discern this I believe through asking for eyes to see and for a passion and a compassion to join in. Prayer is where mission begins and ends. It is in prayer that we work out what our calling is, and it's in prayer that we find the resources to empower that calling.

My plea then is for more of us to take seriously our need to pray; individually, yes, but also and perhaps more importantly together, corporately. Each month, we have that opportunity in our Saturday morning prayer gathering Breathe. And at present it's a small and faithful gathering online. My question to each of us tonight therefore, is if we don't prioritize this, why?

Is it the time perhaps? – 8.30am on a Saturday. Talk to me

Is it because it's online? Again, talk to me

Is it that we think it's only for those who are the spiritually keen or especially 'good' at prayer? Well, of course, there's no such thing. Good prayer is just honest, heartfelt, simple and often silent prayer.

Is it perhaps that we're afraid of being asked to pray aloud or to share something too intimate? I promise that won't happen.

Or is it that we just don't see the point in praying?

If that's the case, my challenge is to give prayer the benefit of the doubt, to come along and see how through prayer, we might actually discern God's mission, should we choose to accept it. Come and see how through prayer God might actually change things, beginning with you and with me. The next Breathe is first Saturday of May – 7th.

Sermon over!

After two years of disruption and uncertainty, it was wonderful and incredibly moving to celebrate the resurrection just nine days ago, with so many of all ages, both in person and online.

A sobering contrast to our celebrations were those of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters who one week later celebrated Orthodox Easter, amid the trauma and the horror of war and displacement. Over the next few months, Hertford will be welcoming over 40 people fleeing from Ukraine. Across our town, the outpouring of generosity and hospitality has been humbling, and in collaboration between ourselves and the parish of All Saints, plans are afoot to welcome and support some of those families and those hosting, both practically and socially, starting with an afternoon drop-in at the St Andrew's Centre. Our thanks go especially to Chris Seward for coordinating this response and our prayers continue for all involved.

Across our own congregations it's been great to welcome lots of new people in the last year and now that we're able to socialize freely, we hope to organise some welcome events both in person and online.

We continue to rejoice in the reintroduction of other ministries, activities and aspects of worship which have been on hold for so long.

Here, I'd like to take this opportunity on your behalf to pay tribute to and to say a huge thank you to our servers Jenny Gray and Sue Little, and our vergers Alan Little, for the many ways they have supported and enabled our services to happen as they've continually adapted to the ever-changing rules and regs. And if you'd like to know more about this valuable team, please let me know, they would greatly value support.

I'd also like to thank Jane Eldred our director of music, our musicians and our choir for their faithful ministry and witness during these uncertain times; again for improvising where necessary and for continuing to lead us in such quality and depth of worship. It's been wonderful to welcome a new generation of younger members into the choir, and Jane I know would love to hear from anyone else who particularly enjoys singing the shower or elsewhere.

One highlight for many of us over the past year was the worship at our joint Away Day at High Leigh with our sister church St Mary's, where John Wachter and Sam Chaplin led the congregation so sensitively and joyfully. The response from those who came was overwhelmingly positive and we're already planning another, this time with more spaces, so book early!

Our Zoom services have been and continue to be a lifeline for many including those who are shielding, self-isolating, prefer it or are holidaying in the Antipodes! More than that, through Zoom we are pioneering new forms of worship and helping to build a new congregation that stretches far and wide. I'd like to say a huge thank you to the team, in particular to Kath Oates and Nick Hoyle.

It was a privilege to license Kath at one of our Zoom services as both Pioneer Enabler and Lay Leader of Worship with a particular focus on online and the new housing development within the parish. Kath is our point of contact for those who join our congregation online and works carefully to help everyone feel valued and included. Our online presence is key both to the present and future ministry and mission of our church. It's our hope that everyone, however and wherever you worship feel part of one body, one community.

During this year we also commissioned Maria Henriksson-Bell as Pioneer Enabler and Lay Leader of Worship. Some of us will already have heard Maria deliver reflections in services, and her pioneer work will be focusing on the Home-schooling, LGBTQ+ and the arts communities within the town. We'll also be hearing later from Maria about the work of our Eco Group.

As already mentioned, our parish is fast expanding with the new development of 300 plus homes on Sele. This is a wonderful opportunity to reach out and our Reaching New People Group are planning to hand-deliver a 'welcome to the neighbourhood' pack, and offer other ways to help people connect such as walking groups in Panshanger Park; some social, some more mindful and reflective.

As we move forward in mission, we want to be listening to God and listening to others. On Sunday 8th May we will be asking our congregations two questions 'what matters to you?' and 'what do you long for?'. We will then ask each member to ask at least one friend who doesn't come to church these same questions. Our hope is that through this exercise in listening, we will discern what's really important in these times, and how and if we might respond.

On Tuesday 29th March this year a group of PCC members and other leaders within the church met with five members of HeartEdge, a network of churches who describe themselves as 'an international, ecumenical movement galvanising churches to be at the heart of their communities, while being with those on the edge'. They came to offer fresh eyes and a collective wisdom; to help us discern the way forward particularly in the use of these wonderful buildings we are entrusted with. HeartEdge focus on four areas; congregation, compassion, culture and commerce. They rightly assert that the days of a church being financed purely by the stewardship of the congregation are coming to an end. If we are still to be worshipping here in 20 years time then we have to look for other ways to imaginatively use our buildings which lie empty for a great majority of the week.

Over this past year it's been great to have the NHS use the hall and church for their vaccination programme. We've also welcomed many hundreds of visitors to the wonderful Lockdown in 30 Objects exhibition. Plans are afoot to hold several concerts this year, as well as a Train Day and Beer Festival. The essential question we will be considering at a future PCC Away Day will be how we might reimagine our buildings to enable more of this outreach, to enhance our worship and to bring in much needed revenue to enable this church to still be here in the future.

We also of course are blessed with beautiful outdoor space, and we continue to be grateful to the Churchyard Team who through their creativity enable many to engage with themes of faith through their tableaux and installations. The donkey is a personal favourite! At Christmas we experimented with Beer and Carols in the churchyard and it worked so well that I think we'll probably stick with that format in the future, weather permitting. Special thanks as always go to Debbie Ledsam and others who spend so much time and energy tending the churchyard gardens.

Tracy and I have become very used to the great outdoors as we've led collective worship and special services with our church schools in playgrounds and woodlands this past year. On behalf of us all, I'd like to say a huge thank you to Tracy for her inspirational ministry and leadership of our youth and children's work, and to the wonderful team who support her. We look forward to seeing how God blesses and uses fantastic initiatives such as Woodland Wonderings, a variation of forest or outdoors church.

At our Advent Sunday service last year, we gave thanks for the many years of worship and witness of Sele Farm Church. By popular demand from a few of the residents at Calton Court, I'm delighted to say that we have reintroduced a fortnightly communion service there with currently around ten people attending.

Huge thanks of course also go to Phil Probert, our parish administrator who so kindly, creatively and professionally goes above and beyond in supporting the ministry of this church. We're indebted both to Phil and Carol Muhr for all they do including our social media presence and website, and thank you to the newly formed Communications Committee (chaired by Forbes) which supports this work.

This past year we have commissioned three new Pastoral Assistants, Charles Ledsam, Kim Hamilton and Jane Cohen, who are licensed to lead home communion and who, with Carol Crowhurst help to coordinate all the wonderful care and support that happens across the congregations.

Our thanks go to the expanding ministry team of our assistant priest Bill (who in retirement continues to offer his gentle and wise ministry among us), our Readers Melanie and Geoff, and our Lay Leaders of Worship Forbes, Kath and Maria.

Huge thanks also go to our wardens and deputy warden who tirelessly work behind the scenes.

There are in a community like this so many people to thank; those who help with coffee mornings, sides duties, refreshments, intercessions, readings, cleaning, flower arranging, looking after the prayer corner, visiting, leading home groups, helping at Toddlers, Shake, TMM, Junior church, Woodland Wonderings, Bell Ringers, clock winding, editing the church magazine, serving on PCC, school governors and other committees, leading compline and Mindfulness, sounds team, trustees of the Centre... and the list goes on. Thank you.

And lastly on a personal note, on behalf of my family and myself, I'd like to thank you all for your encouragement, love patience, prayers and support. I count it a great blessing and a great privilege to be called your vicar.

Rev Alan Stewart