

APCM Report 2025

As this is my last but one Sunday with you before I disappear on Sabbatical, I thought I'd share with you a quote from Barbara Brown Taylor's aptly entitled memoir 'Leaving Church'!

"Gradually I remembered what I had known all along, which is that church is not a stopping place but a starting place for discerning God's presence in this world. By offering people a place where they may engage the steady practice of listening to divine words and celebrating divine sacraments, church can help people gain a feel for how God shows up—not only in Holy Bibles and Holy Communion but also in near neighbors, mysterious strangers, sliced bread, and grocery store wine."

Church is a 'starting place' where we listen for the many ways God shows up. As I reflect on this last year, I've been humbled by the many ways I believe God has shown up among us.

And here are just a few:

After what felt like a very long time of repeat advertising, prayer and searching for a new Children and Families Worker, a chance comment at St Mary's PCC prompted a new member there to invite a friend to apply. That friend was Lindsey, and although this was a new ministry for her and a steep learning curve, her energy and commitment, her passion and compassion have proved beyond doubt that this was absolutely the right appointment. And it's been a real joy seeing Lindsey grow in confidence and how our children respond to her warmth, wisdom and care. A huge thank you also is owed to Lindsey's predecessor Tracy, who over the last eight months has acted as Lindsey's mentor.

Tracy has now stepped back from school's work, and Lindsey very capably has stepped into her shoes. Our work continues across three schools (St Joseph's, Hertingfordbury Cowper and Hertford St Andrew's) with whole-school weekly Collective Worship on Tuesdays and Early Years on Wednesday morning. Members of the congregation continue to support our church school through the Walking Bus and through serving on the Governing Body, and we were delighted to see such positive feedback from both Ofsted and their Church equivalent SIAMS, both particularly impressed with the inspirational leadership at the school.

A particular highlight for me was last month when we welcomed the children into church for the Easter Experience. Across six different stations the children engaged with an interactive retelling of the Easter story, and explored their own hopes and dreams; their own sadness and their joy. There was such a powerful stillness and presence during those times. Thank you again to the amazing team who led this especially the story tellers who told their story up to 15 times that day and 30 times when we did the same for Hertingfordbury Cowper at St Mary's.

During my sabbatical, Lindsey will continue to lead Collective Worship fortnightly.

Back in July last year, Rachel Chaplin wrote to me with an idea about starting a children's choir here in church. Again, it felt like one of those God-incidences as both I and Jane Eldred had been thinking about exactly the same thing. Fast forward and Hertford Children's Choir now rehearse here on Friday evenings and have sung at both the Mayor's 'Cherish Hertford' day as well as at our own Mothering Sunday service; and how brilliant was that! Thank you to Sam and Rachel, and to all those who help with and support such an important and inspiring ministry.

I'd also like to say a huge thank you to all those who continue to support our youth and children's ministry; those who help with Junior Church, TMM, Toastie Tuesday and Toddlers. We are incredibly lucky to have you and very grateful for all that you give.

For some years you might know we've been planning to update our audiovisual system, inspired by a desire to enhance our worship, making it more accessible, and also to safeguard our financial future as we also seek to use this space as a commercial venue for concerts and other events.

We were fortunate to raise almost enough money through grants, an auction of promises and fundraising to install the first phase back in November, but thanks to a very generous anonymous donation we've subsequently been able to install the full system. I hope you agree that this has helped to make our church a more inclusive space for anyone with hearing difficulties and, if you were here for Easter Day, you'll have seen just how the visuals can add to our worship, while at the same time reduce our use of paper.

Here I'd like to pay tribute to our Eco Committee and for all they are doing to help us more carefully steward the valuable resources of our planet and help us work towards the Church of England's target to be carbon neutral by 2030. We've decided to set aside one Sunday each year to focus on our commitment to the environment, and this year's will take place on Sunday 5th October, the weekend before Harvest.

Another joy was to host a six week Exploring Faith course at St Mary's during February and March this year, with about 16 people attending across the two churches. The feedback has been incredibly encouraging, with one person describing the course as 'friendly, interesting, informative and therapeutic'. Another person writes of 'a great sense of us all joining together on our own and each other's spiritual Journeys. Each session beautifully, gently led and discussed with thought provoking ideas and interactions.' So, when we do it again in the Autumn, if you haven't done it, do speak to someone who has and consider coming along.

It's been wonderful to host two Confirmation services over the past year, here at St Andrew's on June 24 and more recently at St Mary's on March 25. Over the past year we've also welcomed lots of new people into our congregation. It really feels like a new season; a new moving of the Spirit among us. It's particularly great to hear that lots of our newer folks have signed up to come along to our Away Day next Sunday.

A few weeks ago, we welcomed Rev Scott Martin as Assistant Priest to the parish. This is great timing considering that I'm disappearing for three months! We look forward to Scott practicing his gifts and ministry among us and I know that you'll all respect the fact that Scott has a demanding full-time job alongside. I'm very grateful to Bill and the wider Ministry Team for all they've given this year and will continue to in my absence. We've had to do some creative thinking around how to sustain things in my absence. To avoid overloading our assistant priests, the monthly all-age services will for the next three months be non-Eucharistic, and led by our Readers Melanie and Geoff. Online Compline will continue, as will Soul Food, and Mindfulness both online, in person and on Sele. Maria will lead our monthly prayer gathering Breathe. Zoom services will also continue under the care of Kath and Nick.

In my absence, Bill will be first point of contact for baptisms, funerals and pastoral matters, aptly supported by our Pastoral Visiting Team, Carol, Charles, Kim and Lyn.

There are so many people to thank, who week by week sustain the ministry, hospitality and mission of this church including our Choir (expertly led by Jane), our musicians, our churchwardens Lesley, Julie and Chris, our Ministry team, our Vergers and Servers, our gardeners, the Flower team, the Sound and Vision team the Coffee teams, bell-ringers, Pastoral visitors, the Finance and Communications Committees, our Prayer Ministry Team, members of the PCC, bookings secretaries and the trustees of the St Andrew's Centre to name but a few.

In particular, I'd like to say an enormous thank you to Phil our parish administrator, who's professionalism, kindness and creativity is beyond exceptional. Thank you also to Carol Muhr, who wears many hats, not least

secretary to the PCC. I'd also like to say thank you to Chris Seward who as well as being assistant church warden, also heads up our program of concerts and the ever-popular HarvestFest and Beer and Carols.

As I prepare to take a Sabbath rest for three months, I know I leave our churches in safe and loving hands. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to rest, explore and refuel. It's hard to believe that I've been here eighteen years now, and some might say that's too long. The last thing I want is to outstay my welcome, but so far it feels absolutely right to stay and I hope that's OK. I am so incredibly proud to be called the leader of such a caring, dynamic and progressive church.

Rev Alan Stewart