

Vicar's Report, 2019/20

I am writing this annual report in the midst of lock-down necessitated by the Covid-19 outbreak. In these extraordinary circumstances, with the annual meeting postponed (and possibly cancelled), writing a report that possibly no-one will read is a surreal business. Nonetheless, it is important to record the achievements of the last year, and so, as usual, I'll try to summarise the past twelve months as best I can.

After all the activity of 2018, when we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the dedication of the church with all panache, 2019 has been a much quieter year, with our Sunday and weekday masses following their now familiar pattern. One change we did make was to the timing of the weekday masses, several of which were not well attended, and so the Friday mass was moved from 6.30pm to 9.30am, and the Tuesday mass from 7.30pm to 1.10pm to suit the needs of office workers, for example from Laurence House (of whom we did at first welcome quite a selection) – unless it is the first Tuesday of the month when we have an additional 7.30pm mass of healing with laying on of hands and anointing. I am particularly grateful for the support of my colleagues in keeping up this cycle; few churches are able to offer a daily mass, and two masses a day is even rarer!

Otherwise, we enjoyed our usual rich cycle of liturgy – Eastertide, Ascension, Pentecost, Corpus Christi, Dedication, the long cycle of summer Sundays in Ordinary Time, Harvest Festival, Christ the King, Advent, Christmas, New Year's eve, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Lent and back to Easter – all celebrated in style with good music and good serving. A major change this year came with Jocelyn Freeman, our director of music, taking time off to have her first baby, and we were delighted to appoint Joe Tobin, a student in choral conducting at the Royal Academy of Music, as her interim replacement, who has made a significant impact on the life of the choir in his short time with us, and whom we have much enjoyed having with us. However, we have still been unable to appoint a permanent organist, but have been very pleased to welcome some excellent Sunday organists including Cliodna Shanahan, Stephen Robinson, Andrew Jones and our mainstay when he is not touring with an opera company, Ian Shaw. Once a month we have continued with 'Invite a Friend' Sundays, when members of the congregation are encouraged to bring someone with them and we have easy-to-follow service booklets (which are

always popular); on these occasions the liturgy also tends to be a little more relaxed, often with our young people performing a sketch or play.

Notable Sundays included our Harvest Festival with a speaker from Christian Aid, Peggy Amoako, who talked to us in the hall afterwards about Christian Aid's latest projects, followed by a parish lunch. Other parish lunches included a bring & share lunch after the annual meeting, a birthday lunch kindly provided Eula Nicholas in June, and a fund-raising lunch in connection with the Summer Fair in July and the Advent Fair in December. And on February 2nd, for the Feast of Candlemass, this year on a Sunday, we had a Sunday morning healing mass with laying on of hands and anointing, where the preacher was the Rev'd Christine Bainbridge, a neighbour of Fr Andrew's at Bromley College. We had a total of 6 clergy to anoint the congregation; it all went very smoothly, as almost the entire congregation came up for anointing, and seemed to have been much appreciated. We will plan another for later in the year.

The Advent Carol Service was particularly good this year and Fr Anthony, my new colleague from Holy Cross Church, Sangley Road, read the Gospel of the Annunciation, while our Christmas Carol Service featured Cat's Chorus who brought with them a good number of supporters and friends. The New Year's Eve liturgy, ably celebrated by Mtr Sue, with Peter Charles preaching, was well attended as usual, with its usual large number of guests.

We ran quiet mornings in Advent ('The Way to the Manger') and Lent ('Praying with St Ignatius'); but decided after Christmas to pause Evening Prayer on Sunday evenings. On March 13th, the choir sang compline in the Lady Chapel, which was beautiful. Another innovation, made possible by the gift by a member of the congregation of a most beautiful modern monstrance created specially for us out of pewter by Victoria Rance, is adoration before the sacrament for 30 minutes every Friday morning before mass. This is much appreciated, and in the already special atmosphere of the Lady Chapel, a time of deep prayer and devotion. Other gifts to the church this year include a set of five purple concelebration stoles and two tailor-made linen altar cloths. And another innovation, we now have gluten-free wafers available for those who need them.

Socially, the year has been rather lower-key compared with the previous year. Nonetheless, in addition to the lunches mentioned above, we

had a well-attended parish barbecue on August 24th, and a parish dance on October 26th, which raised nearly £520. The MU ran a very successful trip to Windsor. And Sunday morning post-mass celebrations go from strength to strength – for many of the congregation, it is the social event of their week; the convivial atmosphere is greatly appreciated by all sections of the congregation, and the diversity of those enjoying coffee and other refreshments together is one of its most attractive elements.

There were a number other specifically fund-raising events over the year; we had a ‘big breakfast’ for Christian Aid in May, and special harvest collection; the Summer Fair raised £515, and the Cox family raise £990 for Cancer Research by walking 26 miles. Beverley Willacey raised money for the Macmillan Coffee Morning on September 27th; Jeanne Mynett raised money for Sri Lanka by selling cards from that country; the Christmas Card booklet, organised by Peter Charles raised money for Toilet Twinning (enough for several toilets); Joyce Turpin organised a Remembrance Tree and raised £51, and the Choir raised money by carol singing round Catford precinct and several pubs. The PCC voted to make substantial donations to Cancer Research, the London Air Ambulance, the African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust, the Africa Child Trust, and a ‘Sand Dams’ charity.

It was a good year for concerts. Jocelyn Freeman and Mairéad Thomas between them organised two outstanding series of concerts by professional musicians; Jocelyn’s ‘Soundeasel’ series, sponsored by (amongst others) the Arts Council, was a series of concerts by young professional musicians after the mass on Sundays, with titles such ‘Vienna, City of Dreams’ and ‘Summer Nights’. Mairéad organised three series of concerts by tutors from the Blackheath Conservatoire, ranging from classical piano duets, and an oboe recital to trumpet and ’cello recitals. Additionally, we had concerts to raise money for medical research into Norrie’s Disease and Refugee Action, and Natalia Loesch gave us a stunning piano recital after mass featuring César Franck’s ‘Prelude, Chorale and Fugue’ played with both technical accuracy and passion.

As well as our quiet mornings, there have been a good number of teaching sessions aimed at different sections of the congregation. Antoinette Ojiako once again led six months’ of training leading up to first communion. Peter and Sue Charles ran a number of film nights, showing Christian-inspired films and leading discussion

on them. We had a training session for new members of the Church Council (of whom there were quite a few this year). And we had several series of Christian Basics courses, courtesy of Fr Andrew, beginning with a (not-well attended) supper – an overview of the Bible (ending with the journeys of St Paul) and an introduction to church history, which included a much-valued session on the origins of the Church of England and the rise of other denominations. We also planned a series of Lent study groups based on a Christian Aid booklet (see below), which had to be cancelled after the first two sessions due to the lock-down.

Visiting preachers this year included Mtr Sarah Simpson, curate of Good Shepherd Lee, Canon Mandy Ford, the canon chancellor, and Fr Christopher Rogers, curate of St John’s Church, Downham, all during Advent. Given the richness of Christian experience of our own ministry team, we had decided to preach Lent this year ourselves, basing our sermon series on a small Christian Aid booklet ‘Count your Blessings’, which looks at the effects of climate change through the eyes of farmers in East Africa, and what can be done to ameliorate their predicament; and then after mass, a series of invited speakers were planned to talk to us in the church hall over coffee. We enjoyed presentations from Matthew Shaw, speaking about the role of Healthwatch Lewisham, and Ashraf Dabous, assistant imam from the Lewisham Islamic Centre, Shakeel Begg’s number two, who gave a very articulate talk about the nature of Islam, and the work of the Centre with young people at risk of violence. The other two planned speakers, the Mayor of Lewisham, Damien Egan, and Rossy Kissi-Debra, a local (and now international) campaigner for clean air, whose daughter died of asthma possibly linked to road pollution, sadly had to be postponed due to the lock-down that closed the church the Sunday before Mothering Sunday.

Our important work with our young people continues apace. The choir lay on regular training events for their young singers; Junior Church is run by Matthew & Mairéad Thomas and Antoinette Ojiako; and Antoinette also ran a very successful first communion course for your people. Junior Church staged an impressive number of dramas over the course of the year at our family masses, and also produced an alternative Advent calendar for the weekly sheet. And on May 12th, Precious Igbineweka, Aaron Lapite, Faith Moore, Victoria Obasogie,

Alan Thomas were duly admitted to communion after a six month course. Antoinette began a new course in the autumn, sadly cut short by the Covid lock-down just as the children were approaching the final stages. We are all hugely grateful to all who help out with Junior Church and with the choir, building up the next generation of Christian. In addition, we sold quite a few DVDs of our 'Catford 1968' performance – we still have some left, should anyone want one; we have now reduced the price considerably. And Ruby Fox took part in an artistic event aimed at drawing attention to the imminence of the climate change crisis, 'Sounding Twelve Years', ringing a bell in church to alert people to the dangers ahead; her performance featured in a broadcast on the subject by a German Radio station.

St Laurence's continues to be invested as deeply as possible in the local community, offering its resources to the people of Catford. We hosted an evening for the Catford Free Film Festival, with a showing of 'The Other Side of Hope' by Aki Kaurismäki, a well-known Finnish director, a film about an unlikely relationship between a Finnish businessman and an asylum seeker. We hosted the Catford South local assembly, and the annual clergy study day for all clergy in the Woolwich episcopal area, which was based on the theme of access. Fortunately, the recent improvements to our access as a church meant that we were well placed to host this, although we did have to purchase ramps to deal with the two steps of the altar platform. Our Peace & Justice Group was refounded by Jean Mynett and John Strange, and for One World Week they invited the congregation to complete a questionnaire that had first been used in 1990. The differences in people's answers were striking, especially with regard to climate change. Our Harvest Festival gifts went, as in previous years, to Lewcas, the local church's group supporting Asylum Seekers. And on July 6th, I officiated (for the first time!) at the Borough's annual service of remembrance at the crematorium.

Also on the theme of community involvement, in May we were privileged to host a most remarkable community event. In response to the terrorist attack on a two mosques in Christ Church, New Zealand on March 15th, where 51 people died, the local mosque here in Catford had received many letters and phone calls of support and condolence; then, on Easter Sunday, terrorists attacked three churches in Sri Lanka

(as well as three hotels), killing 259 people. Shakeel Begg suggested organising a joint memorial event for the Christians of Sri Lanka, to be held at St Laurence's. Shakeel and I went to visit Fr Antony Megalan, the parish priest of Holy Cross, himself from South India, and between us on May 5th we laid on a sequence of talks and readings by members of different faith communities across Lewisham, with civic representatives also. It was well attended, and afterwards refreshments were provided by 'A piece of cake', an interfaith group who often provide refreshments at community events. An event like this is the fruit of many years of quiet and patient work by leaders of the different faith communities, which can be quickly focussed at times like these. St Laurence's is truly privileged to be at the heart of a Borough so rich in faith and community groups, who are able to work so closely with each other, and with the support of the local authority. This year, I attended a Hannukah event and 'The Great Lewisham Salaam' – celebrations respectively of Judaism and Islam – both hosted by the Mayor of Lewisham in the Civic Suite.

On a lighter note, our annual interfaith cricket match was this year transformed into an interfaith football match. The St Laurence team, playing together for the first time, played hard, but were defeated 3–1 by a younger and fitter team.

Over the year, we organised, in conjunction with All Saints, Blackheath, not one but two pilgrimages to Italy – first, a glorious week in Paestum, south of Naples, where we stayed in a comfortable monastery with a lovely sea view, and visited the Greek temples at Paestum itself as well as Naples, Herculaneum, Salerno and had a celebratory day sailing along the Amalfi coast shared with Italian bank holiday crowds. And in late October, we went to stay in the Diocesan Retreat House in Cannaregio, in Venice. We were fortunate to enjoy clear, sunny weather and vast number of churches, including celebrating a memorable mass in the ancient church of Santa Fosca, on the island of Torcello.

The fabric of the church still proves time-consuming to maintain, although with every year that passes, I become more aware of quite how stunning a space it is that the interior of the church provides. As homes and flats become smaller and smaller, to be stewards of so magnificent an open space takes on increasing importance not only for ourselves but for the locality. On a sunny day, the light-filled

interior of the church always raises the spirits as the sun stream in through the glazing. It is a truly beautiful space, and worth all the work that goes into maintaining it.

At the end of last year, I reported that Jonathan Louth, the church architect, had discovered some alarming cracks in the concrete, and that we had had some structural engineers in to look at them and at the condition of the structure of the church generally. Their report came back some months ago, fortunately giving us a clean bill of health. There are some local concrete repairs to have done, but basically the building is in good shape. We can now get on with raising the funds for the concrete repairs, and some essential work to the box gutters at the base of the dome, which urgently need relining. At time of writing, we have been promised a grant of £13,000 from the National Churches Trust, and £2,000 from the Rochester Bridge Trust (fortunately, we are in the ancient county of Kent), and have some £11,000 still to raise towards these works. And, the icing on the cake, Ijeoma Nwajiobi co-ordinated the redecoration of the church sacristy, something on our to-do list for about 20 years, and the sacristy, now transformed, is looking great. The other achievement finally realised is the replacement of the Church noticeboard after a number of years of increasing invisibility.

I also reported at the end of last year that Mtr Sue Charles had been appointed parish manager, upon the departure of Marek Nowakowski. Sue has taken the Centre by storm, completely reorganising every aspect of its running. At the end of May, Nick Chapman, our residential caretaker for many years, handed in his notice. The Church Council approved the management committee's decision no longer to have a resident full-time caretaker, and to rent out the caretaker's flat in order to use the income to pay for a number of different caretakers who could be brought in as required. This change has taken considerable work to bring about, but has increased the flexibility and availability of our space. Thus on a Sunday, for example, we now host half a dozen different churches and religious groups. Considerable investment has also been made in necessary repairs and improvements in order to increase the Centre's lettable, and we look forward to seeing the fruits of this next year. The whole congregation owes a huge debt of thanks to Sue, and to the Centre Management Team, Kay Lanston (the chair), Joyce Turpin, Robert Green, Ray Williams, Jeanne Mynett and the churchwardens.

Over the year, as well as Nick Chapman, we also said good-bye to our organ scholar, William Campbell, going on to be organ scholar at Guildford Cathedral, to Nicholas Mannoukas, our organist, who left to go freelance, a temporary farewell to Jocelyn Freeman, who left on maternity leave after the summer term and gave birth to Iker in the autumn, and hello to Joe Tobin, her interim replacement. Fr Martin Preston, who was on the staff here in the early 2000s, moved back into the parish, taking up residence at Oakcroft Nursing home, where he is one of the most visited residents.

A number of parishioners lost close family members – Margaret Greaves lost her mother Marva in early September, as did Victor Obasogie (Rosaline) and Cheryl Boyce (Caroline). Grace Blyth lost her brother John, Frances Satchell her husband Wentworth, and Elvena Oliver her husband John, and former parishioners Lesley Medgett, Ellie Jefferies, John Oliver and Clementine Stonebanks, and former Bishop, Roy Williamson, also died. Orelth Robinson, who for many years used to pop into services very briefly, rarely staying more than a couple of minutes, died in February, as did Aston Lloyd, a familiar figure in the back row of the Sunday congregation. Fr Geoffrey Kirk, vicar for many years of St Stephen's, Lewisham, died in March. We had two particularly tragic deaths: Esme Francis' daughter Donna, a much-loved and energetic school teacher, died suddenly in November at the prime of life; and Fr Ian Thompson, beloved husband of Leanne, died after a brief illness in December. Donna's ninth-night, held in a Youth Club in New Cross, was the largest I have ever attended; while Bishop Christopher himself presided at Ian's funeral, with many of his prison chaplain colleagues also present. Our heart-felt condolences to Esme and Leanne. But we also have things to give thanks for: Perpetua and Ken Agumadu had a baby, Isobel, and Matthew Airende and Helen Ehioghae were joyfully married.

It only remains to give thanks to all those not named above who have happily devoted their time and attention to the good running of the parish. I have been blessed with two exceptionally competent churchwardens, Sybil Bair and Beverley Chin, and am most grateful to them for their support and leadership over the year. With various changes of occupancy at the flats, they have had their work cut out, making sure that all our tenants are content with their lodgings. The ministry team, Fr Iain, Fr Anthony, Fr Andrew, Peter and Mtr Sue Charles, Grace Blyth

and Ijeoma Nwajiobi, have worked incredibly hard over the year, saying masses, conducting funerals, running teaching sessions, preaching and doing a huge amount of pastoral work and giving support to parishioners in need. Thanks to Kofi Hagan, our sacristan, who is here every Saturday preparing the church for the Sunday services, and to Kevin Counihan, who looks after the Lady Chapel. Thank you to the safeguarding team – Peter Charles, aided by Lesley Ihekuna and Esme Alexander – who have had a busy year with various changes of procedure and practice, and some difficult issues to sort out. Thank you to Robert Green, unflagging in his efforts to raise the profile of Christian Aid among the congregation, and to raise funds too, and to Margaret Greaves for running the MU. Thanks too to Debbie Watson, who writes the parish registers, and who has had a relatively easy year with only one wedding and 7 baptisms – rather low numbers of both – and to Sue Dearie, who is brilliant at persuading people to read lessons in church. Some of the young people she has persuaded to do a reading over the last months have read exceptionally well. Marva Phillips and Eleisea Durant reliably staff the Welcome Table every Sunday morning. A final thank you to Andy, our long-suffering finance worker, who has successfully transferred our rather complex accounts into Quickbooks, ensuring their transparency and (relative) ease of use, and to Mark Gayfer, a retired accountant living locally who, without formally even being PCC treasurer has put much time into the preparation of our annual accounts, and giving financial advice generally.

The list could go on – but that will suffice for now, and apologies to anyone I have accidentally omitted. One of the great features of St Laurence's is the very large number of people who are prepared to help out, whether in big

ways or small; without which, our church would certainly not be the diverse, engaged and vibrant community it is today.

Fr Charles

Postscript

Since the period this report largely relates to, the church has been closed on advice from the archbishop, and our services are now conducted solely on line, broadcast from the Vicarage, supplemented by a colour-printed weekly newsletter posted out to all those who do not have access to email or a tablet.

Rather than following the example of some of my colleagues, who try to reproduce a full Sunday service in all its pomp and glory, I have been concerned to try to stream domestically appropriate liturgy – an example of how to celebrate the presence of God and the love of Christ in one's own home.

Particular thanks at this point to Peter Charles, who, together with my colleagues on the ministry team, has risen to the challenge of taking the parish on-line, and become our minister for Facebook, Whatsapp, and much else, alongside everything else that he does for the parish.

Even so, an incarnational religion such as Christianity, that is founded above all on God's embodiment in human flesh, is never going to sit entirely comfortably with the virtual representation of God's very physical love and care for this world on a tablet or phone screen. Few people are called to be hermits in the wilderness for long. Even Jesus, after saying his prayers, came down from the mountain ready for the market place.

And so we look forward to the day – hopefully now not too far away – when we shall be restored to our church, and can worship God with our customary full-bodied praise!