

## Priest-in-Charge's report 2016 APCM.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words.

Well, I can't promise to spare you the couple of thousand words I've written but I thought I'd enhance my priest-charge report by sharing with you some pictures. Let's get right into it. The **first picture** on your hand-out sheet is of children gathered around the altar at our Parish Mass.



I include this picture first as the most important thing we do in our life together is to gather together to break bread in the Eucharist. Throughout 2015 we have seen a steady increase in the number of children that have not only been attending church but taking an active role in the liturgy, serving at the altar, leading prayers and preaching the gospel. Yes, preaching. When the children return from their time in the hall they share what they have been learning about with us after we share The Peace. And this is one of the most important moments in our time together as a gathered community - listening to our youngest members share the Good News of Christ with us and for us.

At a recent Area Leadership conference we shared the roles our children take in worship with other churches in the Area. St Michael's church was heralded as a beacon of best practice. This is something for which each of us should feel immensely proud. In too many churches children have very little, if any, participative role in worship. They are removed from the main church if they make too much noise and church becomes a place only suitable for those who have learnt to conceal their boredom. If the Gospel is to continue to grow and to flourish in this country we need to take very seriously the mission of children and their nurture in the faith. And this happens first and foremost in worship. I want to say how grateful I am to parents and carers who continue, week after week, to make the effort and considerable sacrifice of time and energy to bring their children to this church. As a parent myself, I know that this is far from easy – and I only live next door. We are also deeply indebted to Martin, our churchwarden who also acts as Sacristan on a Sunday morning mobilising and kitting out a team of up to 30 child servers, ably assisted by Heather, Colin and Eileen who have also striven to ensure that the children receive a very high quality of teaching in Children's Church.

Take a look at **picture two**.



In 2015 we also saw the beginnings of a Youth Choir at St Michael's. At this time children are not able to join our main robed choir and yet in 2015 we received many requests from children to take their part in singing praises to God in a choir. By the grace of God, Lucy Field, our previous Hall administrator, introduced our church to Sheena Phillips, a local church musician of considerable expertise and experience who lives practically on the doorstep of the church, just down the road on Flower Lane.

On Harvest Sunday, 2015, Sheena led her first series of workshops focusing on the theme of thanksgiving for the earth's resources. The second series of workshops were then conducted in the run-up to Advent with a performance on Advent Sunday. The children were encouraged through Sheena's work to think about the meaning of Advent and the coming of Christ *as a baby* at Christmas.

Just think about that for a second.

We have a faith centred upon the incarnation. God becoming human. But not coming as an adult. Coming to earth first and foremost as a tiny, fragile baby. This is how humanity was first called to receive our incarnate Lord and Saviour. Yet, it is ironic that in so many churches the realities of welcoming children into our full worshipping life is not appreciated as a gift from God, or as a reflection of Christ in our midst, but as an inconvenience or an annoyance. I thank God that this is NOT the case at St Michael's. Children make age appropriate noises. They run about. They explore our church. They challenge us to receive the grace of God in new ways. And long, LONG may this continue.

We see the fruits of Sheena's excellent work with our youngest members in front of us – the Banner of Light on our nave altar and the Banner of Life on the main altar. Sheena also coordinated the carol singing outside Marks and Spenser on Mill Hill Broadway at very short notice. **(see pictures three and four)**



It is great that the next series of workshops will focus on the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church at Pentecost (the poster for this is **picture five** of the handout).

But we do also need to think seriously about how we continue to enable our youngest members to take a full and active role in the musical life of this church.

After all, St Michael's has a long a proud tradition of children participating fully in its musical life. It is my hope and my prayer that in the next year we will see the re-introduction of a full, robed, traditional children's choir. And, if this is considered to be a mission priority by the PCC and the wider church, we will need to go about discovering what practical steps can be put in place to find the right person to lead





such a permanent children's choir and to make this possible. I should stress that any children's choir should be an ADDITION rather than in any way a substitute to the excellent musical leadership that continues to be offered by our Director of Music Gordon Whittard.

We continue to be deeply indebted to Gordon for all that he does in playing the organ so excellently at our parish Mass and leading our adult choir. Take a look at **picture six** from the Advent Choir Service.



Gordon often goes above and beyond the call of duty, playing at midweek weddings and funerals, augmenting the adult choir by bringing together a huge range of contacts from other church communities and beyond and leading excellent reflective services throughout the year such as our Advent Carol Service – which remains one of the most powerful and prayerful services of the entire year as the beauty of the music actively leads people into prayer and reflective silence.

And now, moving away from a focus on children to the other end of the age spectrum, I do want to stress that the “boiler room” work of

our church, by that I don't mean our sometimes inadequate heating system, but the HARD work of prayer, and the daily and often unseen or overlooked expenditure of time and energy and expertise that any church needs to keep moving forward, is currently largely done by people in their seventies, eighties and in more than one case their nineties.

Now, what keeps me up at night worrying more than anything else is what would happen if certain people in this church were no longer able to continue to do these invaluable ministries? Church flowers, parent and toddler, care of the sacristy linen, management of the church building throughout the week and preparing for services, cleaning and care of the fabric of the church, there are so many "everyday" ministries that are taken for granted, or perhaps even totally unnoticed, by a large proportion of those who come to worship with us on a Sunday.

And this is a problem. It's a big problem.

Because at the moment our patterns of church attendance are changing dramatically. We are in touch with over 420 people. And of that number a pool of around 250 people regularly worship in this church. But we see only a small proportion, about 40 to 50 of them every, or almost every, week. And yet, our average attendance hovers between 65 and 80. That means sometimes up to half of those we see in church on any given Sunday are people who come to St Michaels once every month or even once every six weeks.

And as a consequence, we, like many other London churches, face the challenge of encouraging those who are currently on the edges of our church communities to take their place at the centre of our worshipping life together.

So how do we do this?

Well first, as I've said before, we to get to know people and we need to know people by name. And it's tough. I know. But it's not impossible. Long standing members certainly need to know everyone who attends church at least twice a month or more. We are not yet such a large church that this is too much to ask –but it won't happen if you don't desire it to happen. And this is especially important if you are someone in our church who occupies a position of responsibility. If you currently do a job in the church you should be actively praying and asking God to help you discern who might partner with you in your task. And if possible you should look first to the newer members of our community, after all the answer to your prayers is sometimes found in the friend you do not yet know.

As our Archdeacon said at our last triennial report *“Giving someone a job can be a way of drawing them into the congregation and deepening their discipleship. It is that sort of opportunity that should be sought...In common with many of our parishes there is a difficulty that people are time poor. It seems to me that careful listening to people's actual circumstances is required such that what is offered responds to people's needs rather than to preconception of what the church should offer.”* The Archdeacon continues *“Time and again I had the conversation about adjusting the ways in which jobs are done to respond to modern patterns of volunteering.”*

Take a look at **picture seven**. It's a picture from our church cleaning day on October 31. In the picture you will see people who have attended St Michael's for many years, at least one who has attended



for less than three months when the picture was taken, and everyone in between.

The turn-out at the cleaning day was fantastic and as you can see from the smiling faces on the picture people really did have a great time. But why did it work? Well, first people were invited, by name, not just the usual people who already do everything, but people who had not previously volunteered in such a way before in our church. Secondly, what people were asked to do was not open-ended. They were not asked to adopt a role that they would occupy for ever more and potentially be unable to drop. Instead they were asked to give a few hours of their time at a one-off event with a clear objective. Yes, the event will need to be repeated, but at the time of them being invited by name to participate they were only asked to commit to one half day of cleaning.

I wonder whether this is where we need to head as a church with far more of our ministries and duties. I realise we will still need people who are willing to step up and take on specific and ongoing roles. However, where possible should we consider the ways in which it might be possible to break down some of these traditional roles into discrete, achievable, one off goals. I know rotas are necessary for some duties – but they can also be terrifying and off-putting. Instead, asking people who have never volunteered before to help, or read, set up for a service, or bring forward the gifts at a one-off event or service may be less intimidating. I wonder whether this approach might be the secret to increasing inclusion and participation in our church-life.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I want to again commend the considerable lengths we have gone to as a church in 2015 to reach out to our local community. In this we are hugely indebted to Gillian Asquith who heroically stepped into the breach, taking over the administrative duties of Hartley Hall after our previous paid hall administrator Lucy Field resigned in August. The hall is the key missionary tool we have as a church for outreach. And through



Gillian's herculean efforts of time, energy and expertise, which she offers entirely voluntarily, we are reaching out to many members of our community who had previously not set foot in our church or hall.

Take a look at **pictures eight** and **nine** from the inaugural meeting of the University of the Third Age. Since the opening in November 2015 well over 500 different people have got in touch with the U3A through attending events at Hartley Hall. And these are all active, retired, people, mostly in their 50, 60 and early 70's – which are crucially the most under-represented group in our current church membership. Yet, these tend to be the people who are now freed from the direct responsibilities of work or daily childcare and actually have the time and the expertise to take a very active role in church life. Yes, a significant number of them are Jewish, but by no means all of them. I have already had conversations with U3A people who have previously attended church, sometimes even St Michael's, but stopped attending in the 1980's or 1990's. Through participation in events in our church hall there may be a gateway to returning or entering into the worshipping life of our church for the first time. Please do pray for this to happen. Where possible the U3A needs church members like you befriending, encouraging and gently sharing the good news of Christ with an open arm of invitation to this worshipping community wherever appropriate or possible.





Through Gillian's hard-work in the hall in the later part of 2015 we have also dramatically increased our work in partnership with other community care providers such as Age UK and Barnet Voice to name but a few. **Pictures ten** and **eleven** in your hand-out are from the hugely successful men's cookery classes we host in the downstairs foyer and kitchen and our thanks in particular go to Frances Parnaby and Nancy Nelson for this valuable work.







While on the theme of outward-looking, imaginative and creative partnership I cannot fail to briefly mention the excellent shared service we had on Christ the King Sunday last year with the Salvation Army. **Pictures twelve and thirteen** really do say it all. I hope that you will join with me in hoping that we will have this wonderful service at St Michael's Church again on Christ the King this year.





And I'm sure Evelyn Semlyen would also never forgive me if I did not briefly mention the excellent work Churches Together has been doing throughout 2015. **Pictures fourteen, fifteen and sixteen** show the Churches Together praise service we hosted at St Michael's in June, an AGM meeting which with a record turn-out which I'm sure had nothing whatsoever to do with the choice of venue at the Three Hammers public house. And lastly Friedgard's Scrimgeour wonderfully organised a study day with Father Desmond Tillyer taking us through the teachings of St John of the Cross, which although not itself a churches together event, was attended by members across our church communities and beyond.





**Picture seventeen** illustrates the hall has also hosted some famous (and infamous) people and has been a hotbed of political activity throughout.



But in all seriousness... I want to end this report with pictures of the real VIPs - that is each of you – pictures of our church community sat together eating lunch in our church hall. I began this report with a picture of our youngest members gathered around the altar and it is only fitting that we end it gathered around another table. Because these are the two tables of our community life as Christians – and they are both equally important – but for different reasons. Our altar table of worship, thanksgiving and remembrance of Christ's saving acts and our social table of fellowship. Both are places where bread is broken in love. And the family who worships together, the family who eats together, in more ways than one, is the church family who stays together. Those who ensure that we meet together around the social table have a great and important ministry in our church for which I continue to be very thankful. My ongoing prayer is that in 2016 both of these tables would continue to be places of welcome,

inclusion and joy in our church life together. Let us strive to know each other as Christ knows us. **Amen.**





