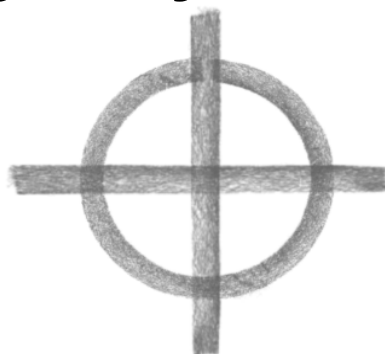


CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

Church Way Iffley Oxford OX4 4EG



The Annual Report of the Parochial Church Council for the year ended 31 December 2023

Incumbent
Vacancy

Bank
Barclays, PO Box 333, Oxford, OX1 3HS

Independent Examiner
Mr John McLintock, 12 Mill Lane, Iffley, Oxford, OX4 4EJ

Registered Charity Number
1128523

SUMMARY OF OUR VOCATION

We are called to be A Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world: contemplative, compassionate, courageous.

We would like to be known for six things:

- The depth of our spiritual life
- Our commitment to bring life to others
- The stepping-stones we put in place for those who wish to journey with us
- The vibrancy of our common life
- The beauty of our church building
- Our ability to work together

PAROCHIAL CHURCH COUNCIL

Purpose

St Mary's Parochial Church Council (the PCC) has the responsibility of co-operating with the incumbent in promoting in the ecclesiastical parish the whole mission of the Church, pastoral, evangelistic, social and ecumenical. It also has responsibility for the management of the Church property in the parish – St Mary's Church and Churchyard, the Church Hall, Church Vestry, Church Office and Church House.

Membership (since the APCM)

Members of the PCC are either ex officio or elected by the Annual Parochial Church Meeting (APCM) or co-opted by the PCC in accordance with the Church Representation Rules 2020.

<i>Churchwardens</i>	Sarah Beaver Tom Leach	Ex officio 2022 onwards Ex officio 2020 onwards
<i>Elected PCC members</i>	Hilary Pearson Guin Webster Kate Stilborn Alex Marshall Jane McBain David Patrick Alex Jacoby Alice Lawhead Deborah Burrows John Harris Andrew Stilborn Maggie Wilson	2018-2024 2020-2024 2016-2025 2019-2025 2019-2025 2023-2026 2023-2026 2023-2026 2023-2026 2023-2025 2023-2024 2023-2024
<i>Co opted PCC member</i>	Penny Tyack	Safeguarding Officer
<i>PCC Appointments</i>	Tom Leach Kate Stilborn Alex Marshall Janet Low Hilary Pearson Sarah Beaver Penny Tyack Jane McBain Lorna Bourdeaux Hilary Pearson Penny Tyack Janet Low Lucy Phillips	<i>PCC Chair</i> <i>PCC Secretary</i> <i>PCC Treasurer</i> <i>Electoral Roll Officer</i> <i>Data Compliance Officer</i> <i>Health & Safety Officer</i> <i>Fire Officer</i> <i>Safeguarding Officer</i> <i>Children's Advocate</i> <i>Disclosure and Barring Service Secretary</i> <i>Friends of St Mary's</i> <i>Friends of St Mary's</i> <i>Parish Secretary</i> <i>Assistant Parish Secretary & Hall Bookings Secretary</i>

Churchwardens' Report on the Activities of the Parish

Following Andrew Mc Kearney's announcement in late 2022 of his planned retirement in the summer of 2023, much of the early part of the year was spent planning for the vacancy and the preparation of the Parish Profile necessary for the appointment of his successor. Four of us worked closely together to prepare a draft Parish Profile for discussion at the PCC. This work was also informed by the outcome of the two very well-attended workshops held after church in December 2022 and April 2023 to develop our vision for the future. These confirmed the many strengths of the church and that it continues to wish to be known for the following characteristics:

- The depth of our spiritual life
- Our commitment to bring life to others.
- The stepping stones we put in place for those who wish to journey with us
- The vibrancy of our common life
- The beauty of our church building
- Our ability to work together.

But participants also recognised that our regular congregation is largely white, elderly, resident in Iffley or outside the parish and does not reflect the diversity of the wider community of the parish. There was particular concern about the low numbers of young people and their families attending the church and a sense of enthusiasm to address this by better communication and outreach in future. In late 2023 we started discussions with the parishes of Littlemore, Cowley, and Blackbird Leys on how we could work together more closely on this, including preparing an application for some additional funding to support this outreach.

The Sunday after Ascension was Andrew and Sarah's last service in Iffley, an occasion for thanksgiving and celebration followed by a splendid lunch in the Parish Hall. But greatly missed though Andrew and Sarah are, our Assistant Priests, the Revd. David Barton and the Revd Dr Graham Low, have worked tirelessly to ensure that we have been able to maintain the main regular Sunday and Wednesday morning services at the church, albeit with fewer early morning and evening services. They have also been greatly assisted by the Revd Peter Boulton-Lea, the Revd. Canon Alwyn Pettersen, and the Revd. Professor Judith Brown, who have regularly preached and taken services in Church, and by the regular preaching contributions from our licensed lay preachers, Alice Lawhead, Hilary Pearson, and Roger Wagner. In addition, the parish has benefitted from visits from a number of other clergy, including the Bishop, the Dean of Christchurch (Patron of the living), the Acting Archdeacon, and the Area Dean. The wider Ministry Team, including lay people, have also ensured that the pattern of pastoral care and support to the frailer members of our worshipping community has been maintained.

Many others have also taken on additional responsibilities to help ensure that our parish life and worship continues as far and as fully as possible but Janet Low, who has assumed the role of Parish Administrator during the vacancy, has played a particularly important role as well as continuing to co-ordinate the music. We are most grateful to her and the many others who have contributed in so many different ways to maintain our worship and Christian life together.

Following the Section 11 PCC meeting which appointed the two churchwardens to represent them in the process for appointing the new incumbent, 35 people attended the Section 12 meeting chaired by the Acting Archdeacon on 11 August. This approved the Parish Profile subject to further clarification of the church's position on Living in Love and Faith. The actual advertisement of the post was

delayed until November because of continuing discussions between the owner of the Rectory (Christ Church) and the diocese about the terms of the lease. Following interviews on 8 December, the Revd. Clare Hayns, currently Chaplain and Welfare Co-ordinator at Christ Church, was appointed to the post.

Looking back on the year, it has been remarkable how our Church community has held together so well during the vacancy and how well we have been supported by so many from within the parish, the deanery, and the diocese. We are most grateful to them all.

However, the Church's financial position continues to be challenging. In his introduction to his last Annual Report Andrew McKearney highlighted the problems caused by a gradually reducing number of subscribers to the Parish Giving Scheme. In 2023, some generous individual donations and income from the letting of Church House and the Hall meant that overall, we were able to achieve a small surplus but the income from individual donations, the regular Parish Giving Scheme, fees etc was insufficient to cover the costs of church operations. We therefore planned a stewardship campaign to be launched in early 2024.

Tom Leach and Sarah Beaver

Church Electoral Roll

At the end of 2023 (2022) there were 127 (126) members on the Electoral roll, of which 38 (34) lived outside the parish.

Janet Low

Churchwardens' Report on the Fabric, Goods and Ornaments of the Church

A report of the work carried out on the Church, Vestry, Churchyard, and Church House during 2023 is contained in the Fabric Committee Report. The annual check of the Church Silver, Fixtures and Fittings has been carried out. The digital Terrier is complete with digital and hard copy photographs of all church silver. The current hardcopy Terrier is also complete and available for inspection.

Tom Leach & Sarah Beaver

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is a core concern of our church community. It is discussed at every PCC meeting where we are finding that the more we talk together the more aware we are of our blind spots and of potential risks. We are discovering that as an alert and caring community we really can help, not least by knowing how to record concerns and to access professional guidance.

St Mary's has a lively tradition of committed volunteers. This year 45 people offered their time, energy and skills on behalf of the church community, many undertaking more than one role. 34 of them took specific responsibility for the safeguarding of children, young people and vulnerable adults and have up-to-date safeguarding training and DBS certificates. These included our 4 authorised lay preachers, 2 pastoral assistants, 2 Fish & Chip Club leaders, 4 Creche helpers, 6 volunteers with Community Cupboard, 3 members of the bell-ringing team, 3 house group leaders, 15 members of the PCC and 7 of the 20 volunteers with Living Stones. Safer recruitment procedures are now in place for all those taking up roles of responsibility for vulnerable children and adults.

Penny Tyack

Health & Safety

The routine annual inspections and checks were carried out as required and the November PCC reviewed and confirmed a slightly updated health and safety policy, the updated risk assessments, including fire risk assessments, for the different aspects of the Church's activities, including the Parish Hall.

Two training and briefing sessions for welcomers, ushers and deputy wardens on emergency arrangements were held in August and September. As agreed at the previous annual H&S review, a verger was present at all weddings as well as funerals to provide appropriate supervision and support in the event of an emergency evacuation or other emergency.

The PCC and Friends of Iffley Village jointly funded two training sessions given by volunteers from South Central Ambulance on the use of the defibrillator equipment kept outside the Vestry. The PCC also agreed to commission the fabrication of a stair rail for the steps from the belfry to the tower roof and brackets to enable a rope rail to be installed on the inside of the stone spiral staircase up the Tower.

Sarah Beaver

General Data Protection Regulation

There are no matters to report.

Hilary Pearson

COUNCILS, COMMITTEES & SYNODS

Proceedings of the Parochial Church Council

A year in review

The role of the Parochial Church Council (PCC) is to support clergy in the running and management of their parish. Their primary function is stated as 'promoting in the parish the whole mission of the Church.' Naturally this role is harder without an incumbent, something Andrew recognised in his last PCC meeting where he emphasised that each PCC member had a particularly important role to play in 2023.

The PCC said a very fond farewell to Andrew McKearney in March and credited him with an excellent and thoughtful handover. The PCC are particularly grateful to the Churchwardens, Sarah Beaver and Tom Leach, Janet Low as Parish Administrator and to the Ministry team for all the additional work that they have done to ensure the effective and smooth running of St Mary's during the year.

The recruitment of a new vicar has been the most important and urgent task of the year. The PCC adopted various resolutions to advertise the vacancy, hold formal meetings and appoint parish representatives (the two Churchwardens) to lead on the appointment process. A significant task in the recruitment process was creating a Parish Profile which included a person specification and job description to attract the best vicar possible for St Mary's. The PCC have been very grateful to the whole team who worked hard on getting this complete to a tight deadline and now look forward to Clare Hayns joining St Mary's as the new Vicar in April.

Ministry

The PCC supported changes to the timings and frequency of services during the interregnum to ensure that a high quality was maintained whilst there was less resource. The PCC were also very grateful to the support of the newly authorised lay preachers Alice Lawhead, Hilary Pearson and Roger Wagner as well as others such as Alvyn Petterson, Peter Boulton Lea and Judith Brown. The PCC were grateful to the work of Liz Roberts in leading the Fish and Chip Club for many years and were delighted when Andrew Stilborn and David Patrick took over as leaders when Liz stepped down after the summer.

David Patrick joined the PCC in 2023 and brought a new focus on the website and social media as an increasingly important part of our ministry as a church recognising that an online presence will have a very significant impact on the size and shape of our future congregation.

Financial Matters

The Treasurer and churchwardens have attended a number of Deanery meetings during the autumn to discuss how, as a Deanery, we can continue to work together to deliver our Parish Share in a way

that is both affordable and equitable, in terms of reflecting different parishes' ability to pay. Although our Parish Share would have been considerably lower if we had adopted the new diocesan formula within the deanery, due to challenges with Deanery finances and the relatively high number of stipendiary clergy we currently have our Parish Share will increase from £56k to £66,833 in 2024 with a 10% rebate for each month that we do not have an incumbent.

There has been considerable concern during the year about the Church finances as an operational shortfall has been predicted for most of the year. With thanks to some legacy income and generous one-off donations from parishioners as well as excellent income from the Church Hall this year a small surplus was achieved in 2023. However, inflationary pressures and reductions in Parish Giving mean that a deficit of £7k is predicted in 2024. The PCC agreed to start a Stewardship campaign in early 2024 to raise funds.

Church Buildings and Churchyard

It was a relief during the year to learn from a chartered surveyor that the Church Hall roof did not have to be re-thatched for another two or three years. Partly due to Lucy's excellent administration, Church Hall occupancy was very strong and exceeded last year's record takings. The PCC recognised that proposals for the Controlled Parking Zone could bear heavily on income to the Hall and impede access to the church if they were approved.

The Quinquennial Survey Report identified some minor works such as the clearing of gutters and the stabilising of a lamp post in the church yard. The Fabric Committee began to progress the actions in the report. A programme of maintenance and protection work on the Church windows was approved and kindly funded by the Friends of St Mary's (FOSM).

The PCC focused heavily on future options for the Churchyard led by the opportunity of the Court Place development and commissioned a feasibility study, funded by FOSM and a generous individual donation, of options from the parish architect, Andrew Townsend. But before he undertook the work on this, the ancient box hedge on the west side of the Church suffered a severe box caterpillar attack, making it appropriate to consider how it might be replaced. Reviewing the outcome of the feasibility study, the PCC felt wider discussions with the congregation and local community were needed to ensure that decisions balanced the needs of the congregation, the community as well as any visitors to the church. Following this, the PCC proposed that the Fabric Committee, enlarged to include FOIV and FOSM representatives, considered responses, sought professional advice on the hedge, and reported back to the PCC in January 2024.

The Curacy House was also a subject of much discussion and deliberation throughout the year. The PCC has been deeply grateful to Sarah Beaver for the time that she has given to the ongoing work in managing the property issues. During the year the PCC supported the removal of a birch and a horse chestnut tree as recommended in the subsidence report.

Safeguarding

During the year Penny Tyack (safeguarding lead) led training and discussions with the PCC and ensured that all DBS checks and formal safeguarding courses were completed by all relevant volunteers. The PCC approved a revised Safeguarding policy and Safeguarding Action Plan.

Health and Safety

The PCC approved a revised Parish Health & Safety Policy alongside updated Health and Safety and Fire Risk Assessments. The PCC approved the proposals for installation of a rope rail on the spiral staircase in the Church Tower and a fixed rail for the steps from the bell chamber to the roof. The PCC also facilitated defibrillator training in the parish.

Charitable Giving

The PCC supported the work of the Charity Committee throughout the year which included raising funds for the Harvest Appeal and support of a Keyhole Garden in the Church Yard.

Living Stones Steering Group

The PCC continued to support and delight in the excellent work of Living Stones during the year.

2024

In addition to welcoming a new vicar and any changes that this is likely to bring, 2024 is likely to see an increased focus on improving our website and social media, focus on the stewardship campaign, and continued focus on the Churchyard Development Plan.

Standing Committee

Sarah Beaver, Tom Leach, Alex Marshall, Kate Stilborn

Standing Committee has been active during the vacancy, conducting its business on matters such as Church House management and other unbudgeted urgent expenditure by email correspondence.

Charities Committee

Sarah Beaver, Deb Burrows, Jane McBain, Kate Stilborn, Maggie Wilson, Andrew and Sarah McKearney (until May) The committee met four times in March, June, August, and October. As in previous years, our efforts were focussed on Christian Aid Week in May, the Harvest Appeal in September to November and the Christmas Appeal in December. The main fundraising event for Christian Aid Week was a plant stall and for the Harvest Appeal a produce stall, both of which drew on the many talents of the congregation. The Harvest Appeal supported the development of keyhole gardens in Migori in Kenya through Ripple Effect. The recipient of the Christmas Appeal was the Porch, a day centre for the homeless in East Oxford, and this appeal was boosted by the barn dance and carol singing in the village. Donations to these appeals were made in cash, by BACS transfer, cheque or an online tab. These various methods of payment were monitored and will continue to be used. In addition, a regular collection at coffee after the 10.00 a.m. service in cash and through the card reader has provided much needed additional funds for Community Cupboard.

A total of £18,793 was raised in the course of 2023 (£19,647 in 2022), thanks to the continuing generosity of our church community. This comprised £4,727 (£2,283) for Christian Aid Week, £8,749 (£10,960) for the Harvest Appeal, £3,921 (£2,446) for the Christmas Appeal, £348 (£392) for the Children's Society through the Christingle Service and £1046 (£0) for Community Cupboard. The PCC continued with its charitable grants throughout 2023, totalling £5,000, despite the pressure on church finances. These grants were distributed between Arts at the Old Fire Station (£750), Oxford Street Pastor (£750) and Refugee Resource (£500). Rose Hill & Donnington Advice Centre, Donnington Doorstep Family Centre and Community Cupboard each received the sum of £1,000.
Maggie Wilson

Finance Committee

Andrew McKearney (till May), Sarah Beaver, Alex Marshall, Tim Brunton, Barry and Stephanie Newsome, Viviane Robertson, Lucy Phillips

The Finance Committee met in March and September. The high inflation in 2023 put severe pressure on the budget and the uncertainties about the price of energy once our three-year contract came to an end in October 2023 made forecasting difficult. Fortunately, energy prices had by then come down, easing some of the pressures.

Whereas the annual budget has previously only been approved in March, the Treasurer's work on the forecast meant that the PCC were able to approve the overall 2024 budget in November. It reflects a substantial increase in our Parish Share contribution, to £66,833 under the formula used within the deanery. But as this is little more than the cost to the diocese of each stipendiary priest employed, housed, and trained (£65,000) the Finance Committee and PCC felt that this was a reasonable cost for the parish to bear.

The responsibilities for managing the church budget and finances were kept under active review and, to clarify responsibilities during the vacancy, in March the PCC approved the Committee's recommendations for the adoption of a formal financial delegation structure.

At the request of Tom Leach the Committee also investigated the options for moving from Barclays to a more sustainable bank. It initially recommended transferring the account to Lloyds but, in light of criticism of their green credentials, it was asked to consider alternatives.

Sarah Beaver

Church Hall Committee

During the year the committee continued to manage the activities and upkeep of Iffley Church Hall, in support of St Mary's parish mission and the social activities of the wider community. The Church Hall Committee dealt with enquiries, made bookings, managed internal and external maintenance matters and attended to compliance responsibilities.

It will be recalled that an encouraging post-Covid financial result was reported for the previous year, 2022. A substantial increase is again noted for the calendar year 2023 with further rental income growth of over 25 percent, and totalling £31,113 (compared with £24,820 for the previous year). As well as the continuing popularity of our church hall as a venue, and the ongoing and growing loyalty of regular hirers, the administrative initiative and energy of the Hall Bookings Secretary is a material factor in achieving this pleasing outcome.

Tasks undertaken in 2023 included the maintenance of the projector screen, repair of the piano cover, repair of the header tank in the kitchen and gutter, window and beam cleaning.

Meetings of the committee took place on 10 February, 7 July and 24 November.

During 2023 the committee comprised Tim Brunton, John Dean, John Harris (Chairman), Alex Marshall (Treasurer), Diana Nettleton, Lucy Phillips (Bookings Secretary), and Viviane Robertson (Secretary), in addition to the Revd Andrew McKearney *ex officio* until his retirement on 21st May. Sarah Beaver joined the committee for the duration of the incumbency interregnum. The continuing commitment of all members is warmly acknowledged.

John Harris

Fabric Committee

Sarah Beaver, Tom Leach, Tim Brunton, David Patrick, Penny Tyack, David Barton

Following an informal walkabout in March with the parish architect carrying out the churchyard feasibility study (see below), the Fabric Committee met in September 2023 to consider the Quinquennial Survey Report and the outcome of the feasibility study. Susan Walker, the Chair of the Friends of St Mary's and Phil Hart from the Friends of Iffley Village, as well as representatives from Oxford University Development Ltd also attended the meeting, helpfully providing us with broader contextual background to both the history of the churchyard and the Court Place Gardens development.

Church. The flickering and repeated light failure problems experienced following the switch to LED lighting in 2022 were eventually addressed successfully with the installation of a number of new drivers and the relocation of one (lectern) light. Jim Budd also carried out a programme of cleaning and maintenance on the windows during summer 2023, work which included the replacement of six grilles. The cost of this work (£4,600 ex VAT) was funded by a grant from the Friends of St Mary's, Iffley.

The parish architect, Andrew Townsend, carried out the Quinquennial Survey of the church in August. While no major problems were identified, he recommended the removal of moss from the roof, the replacement of cracked and broken slates, the clearance of gutters, and some minor stone repairs, as well as recommending some surveys and conservation work. Some of the roof repair work commenced in December and an Action Plan to carry out the remaining recommendations was prepared for consideration by the Fabric Committee in early 2024.

Digital plans of the church were also prepared by RGL Surveys Ltd, work which will be of long-term benefit for the church and was funded from the church building reserves.

There have been a series of problems with the sound and streaming system in church, making it difficult to diagnose the cause of the difficulties. The PCC has agreed that it is a priority to address them effectively in early 2024.

Vestry. The Landmark Trust, from whom the Church leases the Vestry, conducted an EPC survey of the building and is currently considering the scope for improving its energy efficiency by insulating the roof. Some minor roof leaks await repair.

Churchyard: The early part of the year saw the installation of a wooden compost bin against the east wall of the churchyard. The contractor also removed the ivy from the boundary walls, with the Court Place development assuming responsibility for the removal of ivy from the walls which required scaffolding for their purposes. Whereas in recent years the Church has understood that the wall between Court Place Gardens and the Churchyard was the property of the owners of Court Place Gardens, the University Estates Department produced Land Registry plans which indicated it belongs to the Church and that the legal boundary to the west of the church is immediately behind the box hedge, not on the line of the current iron railing. As it is a closed churchyard (no new burials permitted), the Council are therefore responsible for the wall's repair and maintenance. They replaced and repointed the capping stones on the west end of the south wall of the churchyard in September.

With the redevelopment of Oxford University's immediately adjacent Court Place Gardens site due to complete in September 2024, the PCC decided to commission Andrew Townsend to conduct a feasibility study to identify options for the enhancement of the churchyard, particularly the area to the west of the church, to improve accessibility to the church and churchyard, including the possible provision of an accessible WC. A topographical survey of the churchyard was prepared to inform this work.

As noted in the PCC report, the box caterpillar attack on the hedge significantly changed the context for the study and Andrew Townsend's designs assumed the removal of the current hedge and its replacement by either a wall or another hedge with a gate in the middle to allow a view through the rest of the Oxford University site towards the river.

The PCC did not feel able to make decisions on such issues alone and, in late November, some 50 people from the church and the local community attended presentations given by Andrew Townsend, Professor Susan Walker, and Phil Hart (Friends of Iffley Village) on the broader context for the churchyard proposals, the churchyard's history, and the plans themselves. Attendees and others who accessed the slides on our website were invited to complete a questionnaire on the various options and the responses were summarised in the January magazine and have helped inform decisions that needed to be taken in early 2024.

Implementation of the various measures to enhance the churchyard and improve it and the church's accessibility will be dependent on our ability to raise the necessary funds. They are likely to take many years to implement. In the meantime, during the harvest appeal in aid of Ripple Effect to fund the building of keyhole gardens in Migori, Kenya a small group built a temporary one on the west lawn.

Church House: The tenants who moved into the house in December 2022 are on a three-year lease. The Council's restrictive covenant on the property limiting its use to a 'clergyman or lay worker', meant we had to negotiate the payment of a fee for breaching it. While we were able to achieve agreement on the sum to be paid, there were long delays in drawing up the legal agreement to reflect this and in securing the necessary legal advice.

Following the identification of potential subsidence in the property in 2022, the company appointed by our insurers to handle the claim conducted a number of specialist inspections of the property in 2023. They confirmed that subsidence had taken place and in July required us to remove two trees that they suspected were causing it. Monitoring continued throughout 2023.

Sarah Beaver

Magazine Committee

Members: Rhys Hedges, John Harris, Edwin Pritchard, Jackie Pritchard, Cecily Kirtland, Graham Low
Committee met mostly monthly.

For details of income and expenditure please see the Treasurer's Report.

Nine issues consisted of 24 pages and three of 28. Regular advertising accounted for eight pages in the December 2023 issue.

The print run was 275 per month for 2023.

Jackie Pritchard

Living Stones Committee

Penny Tyack, Marion Casey, Katharine Owen, Elizabeth Mullett, Maggie Wilson

Andrew McKearney's chairmanship of our committee has been much missed. We have also lost Hilary Pearson, Janet Low, Maureen McNaboe and Deborah Burrows. Viviane Robertson, Maggie Wilson and Katharine Owen have joined us and their contributions are highly valued, as were those of the members who have moved on. Every Sunday from Easter to the middle of September it is the privilege of our team of 20 volunteers to welcome visitors to the church and to experience it through so many different people's eyes. The first visitors on Easter Day wrote in the Living Stones Visitor Book, 'Thank you so much for a lovely tour around this magnificent 'little pearl' church.' Another wrote, 'Very moving testament to generations of faith.' The last entry in September was, 'This is my favourite church in the whole world'. We counted at least 415 visitors over the 23 Sunday afternoons, and we hosted a joyful visit from a school.

Our special events focused on people who have left their mark on Iffley Church over its 850-year existence. We learned about the original patron, the improvements and restorations carried out through the centuries and in living memory, and the fairly short-lived west gallery from which hymn-singing was led during services in the 18th and 19th centuries. We heard about some of the village people of the last 200 years, and about three remarkable individuals: a solitary worshipper (Annora), a 17th century Archdeacon (Barten Holyday) and a benefactress (Sarah Nowell), founder of a school for Iffley's children whose legacy still supports local education projects. Almost all our speakers were well known locally, and people came from near and far to hear them.

The year ended with a special thankyou-cum-training day for our volunteers. A guide, an archivist and a book conservationist at the Bodleian Library shared their treasures with twelve of the team, starting in the Divinity School and ending with a book that is as old as Iffley church and was pawned in about 1400 by the abbess of Littlemore Priory.

Penny Tyack

Eco-Church

Eco Church @ St Mary's has reached a critical point. For the last 12 months the group's active ongoing membership in terms of people attending monthly meetings has reduced to two and this is no longer viable for maintaining a programme of activity around climate change issues, as was envisaged when the Eco Church group was formed in 2019.

During the year there has been active support for the creation of a Keyhole Garden, which has been inspired by the commitment of Christine North and Maggie Wilson (Charities Committee Lead). The Keyhole Garden which has been erected on the lawn in front of the west door of the church is part of the fundraising initiative by the Charities Committee to support Ripple Effect's work in Migori, Kenya

to develop small kitchen gardens. The purpose of the garden is to demonstrate the sustainability of a Keyhole Garden and give a vivid example of how financial support can help.

Earlier in March 2023, members of the Eco Church group joined the annual litter pick in Rose Hill mounted by Rose Hill and Iffley Low Carbon (RHILC). On 21 April members joined The Big One in London to express concern about the climate crisis and take part in four days of action outside different government departments in Westminster. For one member of the group it was the first time at this kind of direct protest and it was a particularly vivid thought-provoking experience, with an interesting comment in the Parish Magazine. Copies of a petition on water pollution were circulated in the church and gained a magnificent 70 signatures from members of the Parish. These were sent to several groups – Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP) Thames 21 and End Sewage Pollution. Christine North undertook a commitment to publish her Nature Notes regularly in the Parish Magazine and she has combined this with an update on Eco Church News. In September we helped to design and participate in a Climate Sunday service with prayers on the issue of climate change and various pledges for personal action on climate change from members of the congregation. Liz Roberts worked with children in the Fish and Chip Club to produce a colourful poster which was displayed in the service.

Tom Leach

Cowley Deanery Synod

Discussions in the deanery synod have focused on the financial contributions to be made by each parish in 2024 to enable the deanery to meet its obligations under the new diocesan formula. The Cowley deanery faces considerable financial challenges and, recognising that the current level of stipendiary clergy provision is unsustainable, has begun to consider a way forward. In October, our churchwardens and Treasurer joined us at a meeting with the Bishop and Archdeacon which began to consider this.

Anne Wagner and Elizabeth Harré

GROUPS & TEAMS

Ministry Team

The Ministry Team (clergy and churchwardens) continued fortnightly until Andrew McKearney's retirement in May, with other members of the pastoral team (Susan Morrison, Maureen McNaboe, Sally Brodhurst, and Lorna Bordeaux) joining monthly. From May, the full team, together with Janet Low as Parish Administrator, met monthly to co-ordinate pastoral matters, arrange services and the day to day management of the parish.

Music in Worship

It has been a good year for the choir and music in general at St Mary's. We were able to continue the practice of a sung Evening service once a month throughout the year (except for August) plus a full Choral Evensong in June to celebrate the coronation of King Charles when we were joined by members of the choir of St Nicholas, Marston. We also sang some special music at the morning service on that day. We continued the special evenings of Music and Readings, for Passiontide, Remembrance and Advent and the Carol Service. There was a return visit of Iffley singers to Marston in November for another Choral Evensong. The choir also turned out in good numbers for the final Sunday morning service with Andrew and Sarah, an occasion for celebration despite the inevitable sadness at the ending of an era!

There were two RSCM events, the Epiphany Festival in the cathedral and the Annual Choirs' Festival held this year at St Helen's Church, Abingdon – both of these were attended by groups from St Mary's Singers. The choir continues to expand as regular members bring friends along to visit who then come back again!

The carol-singing round the village, followed by the Barn dance in the hall, were both very well-attended this year and helped to raise a substantial amount for our Christmas Appeal. Iffley Music Society was able to present many varied concerts in the hall and the church but there were not so many outside visiting groups in the church as such events were more difficult to organise and cover during the vacancy. We hope such things will again be possible in future. None of this would be possible without the unfailing support of the other organists, Geoffrey, Tim and Paul who have played regularly on Sunday mornings and evenings as well as for the special occasions – thank you all very much! Our thanks are also due to Graham and David who have held the fort during the vacancy and supported us in what we do at St Mary's. We look forward to welcoming our new vicar Clare, who has been Chaplain to the College Choir at Christ Church for some years, so will bring us some new perspectives.

Janet Low

Taizé Evening Services

Services were held once a month on the 3rd Sunday at 8pm. There was discussion about whether an earlier time should be found but there was a majority feeling that it should remain at 8pm. No service was held in August but for a second year there was a service in December just before Christmas. The average number attending was 16 people. The range was 11 - 25 people. There continues to be a core group of about 8 people who attend every month, about another 6 who attend more often than not and always a few people attending for the first time, sometimes just visiting Oxford. People from several different churches or none come to Taizé services making it very ecumenical and inclusive. Sue Fulford and Simon Fisher, both regular attenders at Taizé services, accepted an invitation early in 2023 to join the team of people who write and lead services. After Sarah McKearney retired in May that left Mo Rooney, Pemma SC, Sue and Simon.

Kevin Armstrong, another regular attender, agreed to play guitar when Pemma was leading a service and didn't want to play as well. He has stepped in on other occasions too. It's great to have Kevin (a jazz guitarist) on board. Alex Marshall continues to provide the main vocal lead for the chants. This is much appreciated.

Pemma Spencer Chapman

Community Cupboard

Community Cupboard, the Foodbank which meets at Rose Hill Methodist Church on a Wednesday afternoon continues to provide a much needed service of food to take home, a hot meal and drinks, and a listening ear to the residents of Rose Hill and the surrounding area, as well as to those who are homeless from across the City. The partnership between the Methodist Church and St Mary's, Iffley goes from strength to strength, with a good number of volunteers from both St Mary's, Rose Hill Methodist Church and the wider Oxford Methodist Circuit and the Local Community. The hospitality and welcome offered by all the volunteers is very much appreciated by the 'friends.'

In 2023, we averaged serving 40 households per week, or 90 people. That figure rose in November and December to an average of 44 households (103 people) and 46 in January (108 people).

We are extremely grateful to Sarah Beaver for the work that she does as treasurer to Community Cupboard, for keeping track of all donations that we receive and assisting with grant applications, the latter of which are increasingly competitive to secure. Finances continue to be at the forefront of our minds, and we are always looking for fundraising opportunities. I was very grateful to all those who sponsored me and my husband for running the Oxford Half in October. We raised a staggering £2000!

Part of the work of Community Cupboard is also to signpost people to, and to foster relationships with other agencies that can support them. We have been privileged to host a representative from the 'No Limits' programme over the last year, who has been able to support 'friends' with preparing CV's, job applications and providing digital devices. We have also hosted a representative from Oxfordshire

Dental Association. And locally our partnerships with Rose Hill Advice Centre and the Junior Youth Club, which are both based at Rose Hill Community Centre, have gone from strength to strength. As Christians it is a great privilege to be able to put our faith into action in quite literally 'feeding the hungry' and I thank God for the way in which this work is continuing in this place of need, and pray that the work will continue to flourish.

Liz Spain, Rose Hill Community Chaplain.

Worship & Prayer Groups

Prayers & Toast

Prayers and Toast meets every Friday morning from 7:30 to 8:45 am, in the Vestry. This group of 6 to 8 has continued for many years to pray requests sent by visitors and others left in the church, prayers for the world, for those who are sick or have passed away, for the joys we find in our daily lives in nature and people we meet, for St Mary's church and its leaders, for our neighbour Rose Hill Methodist and the Community Cupboard, our families and each other. The prayers are held in confidence in the group. Before the prayer time at 8:00, we have freshly brewed coffee, tea and toast with delicious spreads. We welcome everyone whether for a single time or whenever they would like support to join us in prayer.

Barbara Alderson

Julian Group

The Julian Group continues to flourish. We met each month during the year, either in the church, in the warmer months, or in a private house in the colder months. Whether we are in the beautiful and prayerful space of the church, or beside an inviting fire in a house, we value our time together for 45 minutes of silent prayer. The group varies in number, from four up to fifteen. However many or few we are, the period of shared silence is always profound and powerful. Those who are unable to come to the church for the meetings often keep a time of silence at home at the same time.

Sally Brodhurst

Discussion Groups

Poetry Group

About ten of us have met monthly on Monday afternoons in the Church Hall and have greatly enjoyed reading and reflecting on poems from *A Century of Poetry: 100 poems for searching the heart*, a challenging anthology compiled by Rowan Williams.

The possibility of forming a second group has been discussed, but no formal steps to do so have been taken yet.

Graham Low

Widening Horizons

Following Andrew's departure and because of Wendy's state of health this group has not met.

Home Groups

Bible Study Group – Meadow Lane/Fairacres Road

This Bible Study Group is strongly based on the Bible but is also one for fellowship and prayer of which intercessory prayer plays a central part. We share the joys and sorrows of each other's lives while enjoying a cuppa and cakes and then open with prayer requests before the main readings and discussions. We are between 10-12 in number having 2 new members join and three remaining in contact from Wales, Spain and the USA. We have been meeting at Zoe's or Barbara's on a monthly basis throughout the year. Topics for study have ranged widely from the Nativity scenes in depth, through the Gospel miracles, the Transfiguration, to the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians. This current year we have turned to Nicholas King's Study Guide on Luke with the imaginative addition of "The Chosen", a gripping film of Jesus earthly life.

Bible Study Group

We have been able to meet again in 2023 in the Church Hall. We met for 7 sessions on alternate Thursday afternoons from 3 until 5 for two terms – one beginning in September and the other in mid-February. An hour of bible study is followed by coffee and biscuits and conversation. We are very grateful to be able to use the Hall as we are all retired and an afternoon session works well for us. Sadly, due to illness and other commitments our group declined in numbers during the year. At the end of 2023 we had a group of 6-8 people. We are short on leaders, but we managed, and everyone continues to participate and contribute to our discussions.

In the Winter/Spring of 2023 we chose Old Testament, Israelite leaders/figureheads to study from Abraham to Daniel, including Isaac, Jacob, David, Ruth, etc. The study was varied but we were immersed in the stories of the Covenant God held with his people and the love and forgiveness he always gave them despite their rejection of him and his commandments. This study also came back to us to give us an idea for our Winter/Spring 2024 studies.

In the Autumn of 2023, we agreed to use Paula Gooder's book as a framework for studying the Parables of Jesus. It took us deep into the more complex troublesome parables as well as giving us the joy of reading and discussing many of the easier straightforward ones.

Our thanks to Dougall Morrison and Mandy Watts who organised the material for our discussion sessions in 2023 and to all who attended and contributed to our group.

Maureen McNaboe

House Group – Abberbury Road

Our (mostly) fortnightly meetings this year were held both in person and on Zoom. We began with a video series, 'Fruitfulness on the Frontline', which is offered by the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. In it we were challenged to identify and grow the places where our Christian faith can make a difference to the people around us. We found it inspiring and encouraging, and sometimes a bit too challenging! Over the years we have purposefully tried to get out of our collective comfort zone, as we did with this course.

We also did a short self-directed series on parables, and a really good daily Advent book, 'Lighted Windows' by Margaret Silf.

Scrolling through a year's WhatsApp messages, I am reminded that whilst the studies we do together give our group structure and purpose, it is the built up friendships and trust that keep us going. Over the past year, members of our group have experienced serious illness, the deaths of family and friends, practical challenges, and many occasions when prayer and support were needed. We have also celebrated good news and good times. All this is part of the love and deep friendship we share, and that has only grown over the years.

Alice Lawhead

Monday Night Fellowship Group

A new house group was formed in 2023, beginning with a couple of 'taste-and-see' evenings in the summer, and then properly starting in the autumn. The group consists of some people who are relatively new to St. Mary's, as well as some old-timers like Steve and me. Our initial commitment is to meet for a year, and then we will decide if we wish to continue and, if so, how we want to structure our time. We might even come up with a better name for our group!

Our first study was based on the film 'The Way'; an accompanying book called The Long Road to Heaven was our guide. Currently we are discussing the readings and sermon of the Sunday before we meet, digging into the scripture and reflecting on the sermon. Meeting on a Monday has its advantages, as it is (or should be) relatively easy to recall what was said the day before.

Anything new needs a little time to settle in, but we're getting there. We socialise a bit before we get started each evening, and a well-received pancake party is a reminder to make good on the key word in our current group name: fellowship.

Alice Lawhead

Fish & Chip Club

After several years of successful leadership Elizabeth Roberts decided to stand down as leader of the Fish and Chip Club at the end of the 2023 school year. Andrew Stilborn (Stilly) volunteered to take over the running of the group beginning in the new School term time in 2023. There was a productive handover meeting between Liz and Stilly over the summer. The Fish and Chip Club has continued to be held during term time. The number of children coming to the Fish and Chip Club has continued to be small, with intermittent numbers but regular attendance. The age range is currently 4 years to 15 years old, with 2-5 children usually arriving on any Sunday. Two new children have joined in 2023/4 but their attendance has been irregular. Two groups were cancelled due to non-attendance. The group has an active WhatsApp page which has been a popular way to check attendance and update parents with information about the group.

The club has tried to encourage greater numbers by improving advertising around the village, giving out flyers at Rose Hill School and producing activity booklets at the 2023 Christingle Service. Four "Preparation for Christingle" lessons were also advertised and took place on the four-week run up to Christmas and the Christingle Service. These sessions were very well attended but did not encourage any new membership. The majority of the lessons have been written by Elizabeth Roberts and Stilly and supported by David Patrick (who has also led the club) and Janet Low – many thanks to both of them. The club continues the pattern of games, bible stories, discussion and craft activities and allows the children to return in time for a blessing or to receive communion at the altar. The club bought and distributed Church of England Advent Calendars to all attending children in December 2023. This has been the only expense for the club this financial year.

Although it has sometimes been quite challenging to find adult numbers to maintain agreed safeguarding guidelines, I am keen to keep the club running in order to give local children the opportunity to hear stories from the bible in a fun and educational environment.

Andrew Stilborn