

## APCM 2024 Vicar's Report

*"Come to a little worter drinking party Sat night at the Grandstand. Whatever you want to delute your worter with will be fine."* (from the novel "Jayber Crow" by Wendell Berry)

This is the message Jayber finds on his doormat as he comes home one night. As someone struggling to find his feet in the local community, here is an invitation to join the subversives, to find a safe place without judgement where he can be himself. The 'Grandstand' is a clearing in the forest, outside the town, and no preachers are allowed. But it's where some of the most important community building takes place.

Many people in our villages, especially those whose work (or lack of school-age children) means they're not part of the daily friendship-building moments around school and children's groups, feel a little bit fringe. They're unlikely to walk through the doors of the church, but may well engage with a "third place," somewhere "where everybody knows your name," as the Cheers theme-song puts it. This represents a huge opportunity for us to serve and engage with people who are seeking community and outside the current reach of the church. Our own 'Grandstand' has been an engine room for community and mission this year, which we'll talk more about in a moment, and I am deeply grateful to Tom Allen for providing so much skill and energy to make it happen. We remain strongly invested in reconnecting with all of our under-represented demographics, and are continuing to explore what other ways we might do that. But I'm getting ahead of myself -- let me mention some earlier highlights of the year, since our last APCM.

We had a lovely tea party in the vicarage garden in June. (I say 'tea', though we did 'delute' our tea a little!) It was a great warm-up to our August Sunday afternoon tea parties at the church, which enabled us to connect with a large number of villagers. Thanks to all of you who provided cakes etc, and especially to Janine Dunnell and her team (Lois Henley King, Jonathan and Elizabeth Lee, Rachel Gibson and Claire Jenkin) for organising.

In the autumn, we started our monthly afternoon service for young families, "Families @3.30," and we've been having a steady stream of 15-20 people most times. Greater flexibility in our space (see below) will allow this ministry to grow. Families @3.30 has joined a wider pattern of children and family events across the month, shared between Holy Trinity and Seer Green Baptist Church, with whom we continue to enjoy a rich partnership in various aspects of Kingdom ministry in our villages. This pattern includes Toddlers in the Woods, and we again recognise the huge amount of work Ali Cork puts into enabling that to happen each week.

We saw one candidate from the church, Lizzie Pennefather, go forward for confirmation at a service in St Giles with Bishop Alan, who very sadly passed away unexpectedly in February this year. In addition to the confirmation, we have had five infant baptisms across the year, and many of those families are engaged in Families @3.30.

In November, the newly built Grandstand quickly came into its own. It has been home to Whisky Wednesdays – an initiative to gather younger men in the village, around fire and single malts, where they can chat at a deeper level than is natural in the pub. It has taken on a life of its own, with different people initiating food additions and so forth! We don't initiate faith conversations (remember, no preachers allowed), but people bring up issues around faith very naturally, at which point we gently embrace the opportunity within the authenticity that lies at the core.

Also in November, the Grandstand became home to the new youth group, and I am hugely grateful for Sarah Allen who has grabbed this vision and run with it. Within weeks of starting to gather the six teens with whom we had connections, the group grew through nothing we did. God does seem to be on the move among teenagers, and seems to be honouring the work we have done to be ready to welcome them. We were able to put on a wonderful youth-led service in March, where many of our teens served with their considerable gifts in music, tech, and spoken communication.

Before Christmas, Jane Spoerry stood down after many years as our church administrator (having also been warden for a long time!). Words cannot express our appreciation for all that she has brought over the years, and we're delighted that she remains part of the church community, filling gaps as she sees them in a way only she can!

Christmas was full of opportunities among the community, as it always is. There was a notable increase in attendance from last year, though that was partly down to having heating! Again, huge thanks to Tom Allen who navigated the technical and diocesan challenges of solving that.

You will remember that the heating issue triggered some important questions around how to develop our space to best cater for ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. While the heating is working again, the solution we settled on is an interim one in order to allow us the space to make less rushed decisions regarding much deeper, long-term site refurbishment. We have submitted faculty applications to the diocese to enable us to take a few initial steps. These include removing the pulpit and chancel rail to enable choirs and music groups to use the space far more effectively (the need for which was evident in the Christmas services and youth services in particular), removing a few pews to make the back half of the space more flexible, and making the remaining pews more moveable. A big thank you to the working group which is pushing forward with the long- and short- term aspects of this project with me: Tom Allen, Janna Holder, Peter Vinall and Jane Spoerry.

The new year was only just getting going when Janna Holder become very unwell following a wisdom tooth extraction that resulted in a significant infection, further surgery and a long recovery period. The gestures of support from across the villages were testament to how her Kingdom ministry has been felt throughout this community. To suggest that the children's work wasn't the same without her may be the understatement of the year, but we muddled through, all the while deeply concerned for her wellbeing. It is wonderful that she is now back working with us. We remain

conscious that we are incredibly fortunate to have Janna, with her considerable gifts and energy for young families, and indeed for all that she does in a huge variety of ways across the life of the church.

Later in January, Olwyn stepped back from her roles as safeguarding officer and chair of the PCC, to enable her to focus on significant family responsibilities. We are profoundly grateful to her for all she has done over the past years in both of those roles. I am now chairing the PCC – for better or worse – and we are thrilled that Anne Wall has agreed to take on Safeguarding on an interim basis. In February we had our “Safeguarding Sunday” where we talked through why we consider safeguarding so important, how we go about it, and how we can all be part of making this community a safe place for vulnerable people.

Amid those new year losses, however, we were delighted to make the appointment of Janelle Stephenson as interim administrator. We are very grateful to her for all that she has been doing, including initiating major updates to our website, newsletter and other communication tools, alongside the day-to-day administration of the church’s activities. Having drawn the previous format of the Pewsheet to a close, let me take the opportunity to honour Geoffrey Brand, Pam Britton and Nora Bennett for their tireless work on that over the years.

The Pastoral Care team has continued to meet regularly to discuss what we have each been doing to support the vulnerable and isolated in the church community. Much of the team’s ministry goes unseen, but I want to recognise Heather Rowe, Jenny Tebboth, Richard Campbell, Janna Holder, Sue Puttergill and Nigel Morgan, for the amazing work they do in caring as Christ would have us care. We have mourned the loss of two members of our community, doing so in the knowledge that they rest in the peace of Christ and will rise in glory.

Janine Dunnell continues to provide wonderful leadership to two bible study groups, which meet on Wednesday afternoon and evening (the latter being shared with SGBC). If you would be interested in joining one of those groups, or indeed being part of new groups, please be in touch! These provide a deeply rewarding way of growing in maturity and confidence in our faith.

In our morning services, we have been enjoying having Carys Timpson helping us increase the amount of ‘live’ organ again, and we wish her well as she moves away for her studies. We have also started to work on a clearer list of known hymns, as well as risking the occasional foray into something more contemporary, all within our gentle monthly rhythm of services.

For our lead up to Easter, we focussed on the gospel of John, with Tim Chester’s “The Glory of the Cross” as our Lent book, and a sermon series looking at the “I AM” sayings in John. On Maundy Thursday, we had a wonderful meal together in the church, re-enacting something of the Passover meal and sharing communion together. Sarah Allen did an extraordinary job in curating a very memorable evening, and we are very grateful

to her and her team, including Pam Pennefather, Kate Miller, Rachel Gibson and members of the youth group who acted as servers.

Amid all that is going on, I am delighted that we have been able to expand our team of wardens. Janine continues as the only 'full' warden, and let me say a massive thank you to her for the incredible amount she does to keep the church, and the vicar, going. She continues to be a wonderful support to me, and seems particularly adept at spotting where she needs to shore up my weaknesses! In addition to Janine, Tom Allen is now 'deputy warden', with deputised responsibility for buildings and facilities (roles he was already filling), and Anthony Bargioni is now 'assistant warden', with particular responsibility for working with me on the spiritual, visionary and community health of the church. That gives us some pretty big leadership guns, and I love the sheer weight of wisdom, expertise and passion that I experience in our meetings. I am profoundly grateful to each of them for all they are bringing to the mission of the church.