

## Annual Report to APM 2013

It feels as if one way or another we are on the cliff-edge of significant change –for the church world-wide as well as for ourselves. In this coming week we shall witness the enthronement of Pope Francis, followed two days later by the enthronement of Justin Welby as the next Archbishop of Canterbury. Although the enthronement of the new Archbishop will have more immediate impact on our Christian life, we should not underestimate the long-term impact that a new pope will have on us as well, and the combination of them both has the potential to be momentous. They are both reputed to have strong identity with ministry to the poor and marginalized, and both are having to face the need for managerial reform, coping with internal divisions, and the need to re-vitalize and renew their respective churches. Locally we need similarly to revitalize and renew Christian life in our own parish, and my departure in the course of the coming year will allow for that to begin happening. 25 years in one parish is a long time – they have been immensely happy years, fulfilling, demanding and very enjoyable, but it is time for everyone, including Jo and I, that I retire, and I am hoping that in the next couple of months or so I shall be in a position to announce the date of my retirement – a date that many of you as well as many outside of the parish have been waiting to hear for quite a long time! However we have not stood still during the past year, despite the uncertainty. The multitude of reports from parochial organisations is a tribute to that, as well as the detail revealing a good deal of hard work and enthusiasm incorporated within them.

We have embarked upon a number of new initiatives – the restoration of the Organ which has progressed well and now awaits funding; the improvement of the Car Park which is much better than it used to be, the extension of the patio area behind the Church Centre which makes it a more useful area, and the wild-life areas associated with it, together with the cutting and laying of the Churchyard hedge.. Our musical life continues to prosper – the choir goes from strength to strength and makes a very important contribution to our worship through the year. We have also increased the usage of the Church for musical events - there have been some lovely concerts which although not having a direct effect on our own congregational life bring the wider community into church, and allow us to exercise a ministry of hospitality by our ministry of welcome – so important if people are to make a second step into the building. The community Choir has started up and uses St. Michaels as its practice venue. I am particularly grateful to Chris and Pauline Dowie – two of the most hospitable people I know, who do so much for the church through their ministry of music. They provide amazing music, first rate performers, and always manage to offer a glass of wine as part of the experience. It always surprises me that so few of our congregation avail themselves of the opportunity to attend! I am also grateful to Quintusimperfectus for the memorable musical contributions they have made during the year.

In the present climate getting people who feel unworthy even to step into the Church building is not easy, let alone getting them to come to worship, so that anything we can do to introduce people who are unchurched into the building is an important first step. There have been some significant musical events more widely too – the carols round the Christmas tree springs to mind, but the visits of Hayeswood Choir has been a real highlight for those who have enjoyed the experience. Thinking about Schools, our relationship with the schools in the parish has been as vibrant this year as it always is – St. Michael's has continued with its pattern of year assemblies each term in Church which I lead, and I take an assembly each half term for the whole school in the school hall. I also lead a twice termly assembly at Colehill 1<sup>st</sup> School and usually one a term at Hayeswood. The Schools have also provided choirs for other events through the year – the summer fete springs to mind, and they are involved in raising money for the Children's Society through the Christingle Service. On Ash Wednesday we continue to offer an ashing ceremony to the children of the Middle School

We have had some memorable fund-raising social events again and have raised significant amounts of money for charity, helping to send Sheila Soper to South Sudan together with a gift of money. Our support of the Reef has grown through the year – three of us are very involved with the Reef, and I know that they are very grateful indeed for the support that we as a Church offer to them – the use of the kitchen in the past year in order that they could make cakes for the open garden scheme, a BBQ on the patio, and fund-raising which included the New Year's Eve dinner and party at the Vicarage. The Church Centre continues to be a significant meeting place for the wider community and I know from the comments that people make how much it is appreciated and how many people attending it regularly

come to have a sense of belonging to the St. Michael's community although they do not actually attend worship. The office staff are significant in this ministry – often the public face of the Church, and they allow us to keep the church open every morning until 12 noon, a not insignificant achievement when so many church buildings have to remain closed except for worship, as ours was until more recent times. Nor do we suffer from vandalism – I venture to suggest that is because the site is so busy as well as the fact that we enjoy much good will in the whole community. Centre Rendezvous helps enormously in this too – it is a meeting place for all kinds of people and continues to run with great success, thanks to Marjorie and the support that she receives from all of her helpers and volunteers.

There are many people I would like to thank for all of their support and hard work in all kinds of ways during the past year. Those who continue to be willing volunteers for the various rotas that we produce – the servers, the sacristy assistants, the flower rota, those who read at the parish eucharist and assist with the distribution of Holy Communion; the sidespeople who play such an important role in welcoming people and identifying new-comers; the brass cleaners and the Sunday School leaders, the office staff, the choir, the open the book team, and Crossroads staff, those who help with social events, those who lock and unlock the Church Centre, all who help with fund-raising events and organise the fete and Christmas market, as well as the members of the fund-raising committee. Those who assist Stuart with maintaining fabric and the smooth running of the buildings, those who clean the church and look after gardens and grounds; those who wash linen for the altar, and tablecloths for CR. The Lay Pastoral Assistants and those who offer informal support, care and help to the sick and housebound, those who turn out for special appeals for various events – the same faces appear time and time again without fuss or bother, but just quietly get on with the tasks.

Listing all of these tasks, responsibilities and events makes me realise what a complex and multifaceted operation it is we run, and just how much energy, enthusiasm, and willing co-operation is contributed by so many of you all of the time. We are not a large congregation and we do not make a “big show” about our living the Christian life. But those things have never been indicative to me of a movement that is genuine and profound where the gospel is concerned. Small numbers of people deeply committed to the gospel and simply witnessing by the manner of their lives the truth about God can make an extraordinary difference to many many others, without them even being aware of it. They may never refer to how much bible study they do, how many times they have attended a prayer group, or make distinctions between their Christian and non-Christian friends. Yet God is clearly at the heart of their lives, and if you dig a little deeper you discover that of course they pray, are familiar with the bible and are in fellowship with a broad range of people without making judgements about them, or distinctions that are unnecessary and irrelevant.

I hope that what I have described marks the character of St. Michael's Church, and if that is so it is due to the self-sacrifice and commitment of many though there are some who deserve special mention. I have already thanked the Churchwardens – Stuart and Daphne are deeply committed and self-sacrificial workers for the Lord, well supported by Barbara their assistant, and without their work life at St. Michael's would be very different indeed. Jenny our Director of Music never makes any secret of her difficulties with conventional Christian doctrine, yet is one of the most faithful disciples I know. She is always most particular at choir practice that members of the choir not only understand the words that they sing but sing as if they believe and mean them. Her knowledge of the bible turns out to be formidable. She is never afraid to approach the preacher with the beguiling words, “I don't understand why you said...” and all of a sudden you realise that you are rapidly heading out of your depth. So thank you Jenny for all that you bring to this congregation which goes far beyond your musical and choral skills. I should not move on without thanking Muriel who organised a memorable evening for the Queen's Jubilee and who will receive St. Aldhelms Cross in the Cathedral in May – an honour reserved to three lay people per year who have made a significant contribution to the life of the Church through the Diocese.

Those who organise us are often the whipping boys for our resentments or discontent, and I am well aware that those who work closely with me are often wisely circumspect if I am feeling in an argumentative mood. Marjorie does a wonderful job both in running Centre Rendezvous and looking after the office. She is probably the but of more complaints from me than anyone, and I am grateful to her for being so tolerant in her understanding. When she volunteered to take responsibility for keeping

the office tidy she warned me that she would tell me off as she would tell off everyone else. I am glad that she does, and that she doesn't harbour resentments because otherwise she would have many to harbour! The Sunday School leaders are another group who I often think have a rather lonely and thankless task – they beaver away week by week, often unnoticed, and sometimes for what turns out to be literally thankless since they have worked hard to produce something useful and interesting for the young people, only to find that none have turned up. It is very difficult to predict how many or whether there will be any young people. We all acknowledge that there is little to be done about this - the pressures on contemporary family life are considerable and our families are very faithful but I would also like to thank the Sunday School leaders for their fidelity too.

Nigel is someone whom we readily take for granted – he comes up most weeks during the year to look after the grounds and rarely receives acknowledgment. Nor does Margaret Gillingham for the gardening she does, nor Paul for the support that he gives her. And Hilary beavers away unseen in the Vestry, with the support of Janet and others, and so do those who get up early on a Sunday Morning to prepare the Church for the 8am when many are turning over in bed and thinking about breakfast before coming to the 9.30am service!. Barbie does an amazing job keeping the flower rota in order and organising the flowers for festivals, and I know it isn't an easy job. I mention these people not because they are more important than anyone else but because they are all examples among others of those who beaver away quietly, getting on with contributing to the life of the church without notice. I could equally well have mentioned Daphne for looking after the bookings of the Centre, or Karen for cleaning it; Hilary for making the covers for the Christmas panels or Philip for looking after the publicity of our events so diligently and ably. The point is that as Paul reminds us, the body of Christ is made up of many different members and all have a part to play in it. If you haven't been mentioned it isn't because your contribution isn't valued or noticed, but simply that I can't mention everyone.

I end as always by thanking my ministerial colleagues – Lorraine, Mac, Alan and John without whom life would be so much poorer, so much less interesting, challenging and fun. They have been so supportive over the years – they are my friends as well as colleagues and the reason why I have managed to sustain a ministry in one place for 25 years. So thank you for our life together. Without it I would have moved on years ago!

**JWG 2013**