

Rector's report; St. John's AGM 2008

One measure of a person's walk with God is how much thankfulness there is in their hearts and minds. It is easy to get so bogged down in the routines and the problems of life that we forget the blessings. And it is certainly more than possible to get bogged down in the routines and problems of ministry and forget the blessings. As I was preparing for this evening I just had to stop writing my report and turn aside to pray to thank God for this place, for you, for this last year with all its ups and downs, and for the prospects of the future. Since the last AGM I have celebrated the tenth anniversary of my ordination, and I remember the humbling excitement of that occasion in Salisbury cathedral; but I never dreamt of the joys that would follow it, and of the great privilege and responsibility that it is to be Rector of Yeovil with Kingston Pitney. And I do truly thank God that I am here, with Becky and with Harry and with another child on the way. Last Sunday – Harry's baptism - was so special to us and it brought together the blood families we grew up in, and the spiritual family to which we also now belong in Christ. Both of course have had their sadnesses in this last year, but both also have much to be thankful for. And tonight I thank you all for being who you are, and thanks be to God for all his great great blessings.

Now the last thing I want to do is to try and give a 'state of the union' address, as if I were president of the United States. I shall not be doing that, nor do I wish to try and give a great visionary statement each year at the AGM. So tonight I just want to say a few things by way of report on the year and looking ahead as well, on eight different areas, in no particular order.

One. Events for the Church family. We have had some fantastic social events through the year; thanks so much to those who have organised these. Please keep at it, and please ensure that the advertising of these events makes them available to newcomers, not just those who came last year and know what to expect. I thought the Holiday Club barbecue in particular was just fantastic. Hands up who was there for that ... it was in the open air where other people could see the church doing something different together, it followed the holiday club and so it drew in a large number of people and families who are not churchgoers, and it gave the church family, younger and older, a lovely relaxing and sociable Sunday afternoon. You should know by now that we have a church weekend away planned for September. Hands up if you've picked up a form for that ... another brilliant opportunity for us as a church to grow together. I have invited an excellent speaker, whose name is Ian Barclay. He is a retired clergyman, who has ministered in London, Brighton, and most recently in Cannes in the south of France where he led an English-speaking Anglican church for 5 years before retiring, and did a weekly radio broadcast for Brits along the coast as well. He has written some theology, a couple of published detective novels, and is also a cartoonist, and a very good cook – so all in all quite a character and a very good speaker. His wife Hazel is a charming person, and she's coming too; she is an artist and the sort of vivacious person who makes you feel as if you must be part of her family. So I'm thrilled that they are coming to join us.

Two. Mission support. At the AGM last year I said that our mission partners and the agencies we support had received no mention at all at any service or meeting I had been to in 5 months. Well, I'm glad to say that this year we have seen Charlie Thomas who is our link to the Kitwe Kids project in Zambia, and we had a full weekend visit

from the whole family of Lentons who pastor a church in Buenos Aires, and we have also had a visit from Geoff Kimber who with Gill has been in Romania. But I still want to ask: why are we not praying for them more often by name in our services? You will know that the Kimbers are now back permanently in this country, and so we cease to support their work with CMS. The BYG group (Beyond Yeovil Group) is meeting next week to discuss further what our main mission partners should be in the light of that, and we will keep you posted.

On the subject of wider church things, you may know that I was at Lambeth Palace in January for a couple of days. The subject of our discussion was 'future church leadership' and majored on the skills and qualities that we need to look for in the bishops of the future. It seems to me obvious that bishops must serve the parishes, give them as many clergy as possible, and equip the local churches for the tasks of mission and ministry. Bishops do not do the mission of the church – they can either help it or hinder it, but truly it is our job, here on the ground. In the meantime, we await another Lambeth Conference this Summer, which is a ten-yearly gathering of Anglican bishops from around the globe. You may know that America now has a bishop who left his wife and family and lives in an openly homosexual partnership, and that this has caused a tidal wave of disruption across the Anglican Communion. He has not been invited to the Lambeth Conference, but many of those who made him a bishop have been invited, and this means that many faithful and committed bishops from other parts do not feel they can attend. That includes the bishops of Rochester, and a considerable number of African, Asian and S. American bishops and archbishops. So there will be a second conference organised by them, which is called the Global Anglican Future Conference, and will be taking place in the Middle East. Trying and difficult times for the Anglican Church across the world – please pray for all those who are seeking to hold to the truth of the gospel, and to biblical standards in sexuality as in all areas of human life.

Three. Serving the town of Yeovil. We have again hosted the Civic Service, a big town service for Remembrance Sunday, and I took part in a parade for RNAS Yeovilton to celebrate their being awarded the freedom of the town some years ago. Those events put me well beyond my comfort zone, as you can imagine. We have held a flower festival and tower open day, we had Paddy Ashdown to speak – thanks so much to the Friends for organising that – and David Keen is encouraging us to consider how the churches together can provide appropriate witness to Christ, in the new developments which are due to be built around the edge of town.

Four. Staff. It feels slightly unfair to lose our administrator and our Director of Music so soon after my arrival. Helen did a fantastic job in the office for several years. Kath has taken over and I have every confidence in her, she's doing a great job; I fear that we work her very hard. Guy Turner's last Sunday is April 27th, and I think the 10:30 on that day will be a bit of a musical extravaganza; and we shall say our farewells properly then. I wish he wasn't leaving, but the job adverts are out, and please pray for the right person to take over and for our music ministry to continue to develop. I'm greatly relieved to be able to report that Bob Banfield has not handed his notice in, and I do want again to thank you so much for all you do for us, Bob. Much of your work is done unseen, but we do not wish to take it for granted. Thank you. Thank you too to wardens, Readers, and Ed Bangay, Brian Adams, to PCC members and to all who play their part in one ministry or another.

Five. Morning Services. At the PCC away day last June, we agreed that we have certain areas of strength: work with young people, prayer, pastoral work, Hunger for God, resources, and gifted people. We also agreed on certain areas that need development, and these included learning, outreach, evangelism, communication, small groups, youth work and services. In particular there was a desire to make some changes to our Morning Services, to make them more in touch with where today's people are at, to make them something that young people and younger adults will look forward to – as well as those who are older, and to make them reflect the reality of God who is powerful, touching, real, contemporary, challenging, and holy – and whose great desire is that we should hear his voice and be fed from his Word. Quite a task, of course, and while we have taken a step along the road, there are many steps which I'm sure still lie ahead of us. Work is just beginning on a revamp to our service booklet; but the main change for the moment is that as of next month the fourth Sunday will be a Communion Service served by the Music Group. And we are hoping that both the choir and the music group will continue to grow and to be sensitive to the needs and preferences of the whole congregation. I have heard it said – 'O poor James he has been steamrollered into a decision that he can't truly be wanting'. That is not true at all. Change to Morning Services has begun but I certainly hope it has not finished, though it is evolutionary change not revolutionary change. And may I ask you to continue to pray for choir members and music group members, that they will more and more please God and serve his people.

Six. Learning the faith. My heart burns for this: that we should be a teaching, learning and thinking church. My principal task in any week is the sermon I will preach at the end of it, and I know that all who share that preaching ministry here would ask you to come to church expecting to hear God speak through the Scriptures, and to learn and grow in your understanding and in your faith. We have had an expository series on Joshua, a topical series on the church, and a series in 1 Peter which we resume this Sunday after an Easter break. Fellowship Groups, Moore College Course, Spring Harvest, Hill House, the London Men's Convention; these all provide learning opportunities; and read your Bibles at home, read Christian books, learn and never stop learning. We shall soon be hosting an evening here with Dr Chris Wright who is another internationally renowned bible teacher, former missionary, former principal of All Nations Christian College, and he will be considering the place of Christian faith alongside other faiths; I'm sure it will be a mind-stretching evening.

Seven. I have two to go. This one is evangelism and outreach. Who remembers Arthur? I introduced you to Arthur last year at the AGM. He was an imaginary non-Christian with a wife and kids, who came to faith through the ministry of St. John's, grew to mature faith through our work, serving Christ and his church. Now, I don't think we've seen any Arthurs this year, do you? Has anyone come to a new and real faith in Christ through St. John's during these last 12 months? Of course we don't know, and it's rarely that simple anyway, but I can't actually think of anyone quite in that category. If you can, tell me afterwards. Now I mention this NOT so that we feel guilty or failures, NOT because it's all about numerical growth or counting scalps, NOT because every church should be getting bigger all the time. Growth is God's work and he gives it where he chooses – but we should nonetheless be wanting it, praying for it and making ourselves the sort of church where God can give growth. If you met a 40 year old who asked you to help them on their spiritual search, what

would you say? What would you do? How is St. John's helping these people? How can we do it better? That is a question I ask myself often, and I'm asking you as well. How can we draw people to Jesus and introduce them to him so that they may live their lives here and hereafter in relationship with God?

Finally, Youth work. Or to be more specific – what about a youth worker! This is something the PCC have discussed and which you've probably heard me mention before. Some of us had a meeting with the Diocesan Youth Advisor about this, and he recommended that we aim for somebody properly trained, to work to a narrow brief only in our parish, and focused on 11s to 19s. He said that the Diocese would probably give us some money to get us going: perhaps up to 16 thousand spread over three years, until we can be self-sufficient. I met with a small group recently to make some progress on this, and the likely timetable is as follows:

Now – making contact with colleges and courses that train Christian youthworkers, to see what the process is by which their leavers find jobs, and which courses are most likely to meet our needs.

May – we shall begin informing the church properly about the aims and implications of this.

September – a major prayer focus for this project.

October – a pledge day, in which we hope that you will be able to support this by making financial commitments and pledges. We are not looking so much for one-off gifts (though we don't turn them down) but more for ongoing regular giving over and above your current church giving. We are not talking small sums – we are hoping to employ a full-time professionally trained minister to work exclusively with our young people. Is it right to do it, or isn't it?

In January 09 – we shall finalise the job description, adverts and paperwork

February – Advertise

April – Interview

September 09 – if God sends the money, the opportunity, and the right person, this we hope might be their start date.

I wonder if this excites you as much as it does me. Or do you think we are naively aiming for the impossible. I don't think so. In this and in every area of our church life, let's be prayerful, be bold, be generous, be faithful – for the glory of God and for the future of our church.

James Dudley-Smith

2nd April 2008