



ST PAUL'S, WOKINGHAM

with

ST NICHOLAS' EMMBROOK



PARISH REPORTS 2024



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Introductory Note

The Annual Report prepared with the Financial Statements for the Charity Commission contains information on many aspects of parish life, including the PCC sub-committees. Parishioners are encouraged to read it in order to get a fuller picture of the life and work of the Parish in 2024. It is supplemented by the following reports.

And thank you, thank you, thank you for all you bring and offer and share and treasure and bring and... none of this would be possible without you and your heartfelt response to God's love.

A letter from Fr Richard

After 11 and a half very happy and fulfilled years as Rector it was hard to leave the parish- but there was a real sense of God's call into a new place, a new diocese and a new role and that sense of possibility and adventure has been very much the daily reality of my first seven months in Norwich. There have been some real pangs and a sense of sadness, of course, but it has felt every day that I am in the right place doing something useful and doing it with God's blessing and support. And a real sense that all of my time in Wokingham and Sonning and the Archdeaconry had been preparing me for this role and this moment. Part of my role is about building a coherent and connected team from the very talented people in the Parish Support Team who are experts in working with Children and Young People, encouraging generous giving, exploring new ways of being the church and care for the environment, along with those working to encourage lay and ordained vocations and clergy wellbeing and growth. Part of the role is about being out and about, hearing about what is working and where the challenges lie and celebrating the things which are going well. I have been to a lot of Deanery Synods and Chapters already and am keen to keep getting out all across this beautiful county as much as I can. The third part of my role is about helping to shape and deliver a Diocesan strategy which identifies the specific challenges we face as a primarily rural diocese with over 650 church buildings, highlights the things which lead to growth in our context and encourage the spread of that good practice all across Norfolk and Waveney. This is a challenging and complex piece of work and I am relishing being part of it. All in all, it has been a very good move. I am trying to take one service a week to keep my hand in and because seeing local churches on a Sunday is a really good way to find out what is going on. Thank you again for everything we shared and for everything we learnt together. Please keep praying for us as we will most assuredly continue to pray for you and for the new Rector when they arrive. I hope and pray that they will be as supported, as cared for and as fulfilled as I was in that most joyous and proud of roles.

The Rev'd Richard Lamey, Director of Mission and Ministry, Diocese of Norwich

Another one bites the dust

Reading Fr Richard's report for 2023 I was struck that history could be repeating itself. The first item on his review was the loss of the Oak tree. In 2024 we suffered a second loss as the Cedar tree became too dangerous to leave, and had to be reduced to the rather desolate object it has now become. Hopefully Andy's plan to surround it with roses will improve the look.

Another minor upset occurred in May when we suffered a break-in. Nothing of value was stolen, but the South Door and wall safe both suffered significant damage. The result though was a completely refurbished South Door, which is definitely an improvement on the well-weathered original.

To counterbalance these issues, we have continued to see a healthy growth in our congregation, with the live streaming still proving popular. We enjoyed a packed Holy Week and joyful Easter, even the weather which prevented the shoe cleaning in the marketplace did not dampen our spirits as the Parish continued to thrive and embrace initiatives such as the uplifting quiet days, the meditation group, and the ever-popular sermon series.

During the year we also managed to replace our hymn books. The cost was borne by donations from a generous congregation. In fact, you were so generous we were able to purchase more than originally planned, and have some over to support the maintenance of the organ. Just another example of everyone surprising us by going the extra mile and delivering more than expected.

However, just to avoid us getting complacent, God whispered in Fr Richard's ear and there he was, gone!

But were we downhearted? Well, yes a little, but also pleased for Richard that he had been led to a position in which he is more than able and amply suited to exercise his many talents. The Parish as a whole and the churches individually gave him a magnificent send off, and just to be sure he really had gone, a large number made the trip to Norwich to see him installed in his new role as Director of Mission and Ministry.

Then the fun began. We had to put together a Parish Profile and to advertise for a replacement. To enable us to determine our needs we held sessions in each church to find what our congregations thought we should look for. The results were wide ranging, but also similar for all three churches. Key elements of this discernment were a need to engage more with the children and young people locally, to re-invigorate our outreach to the local community, and to grow together spiritually. We also identified kindness and a deep-seated sense of inclusiveness in our churches. All of this and more were included in our Parish Profile, which painted an exciting

picture of a thriving and inviting Parish with variety and a warm welcome promised to anyone considering the role of Rector.

Our hopes of a quick appointment proved slightly over-optimistic as we were unable to find suitable candidates for an interview until this February. However, as you are already aware, we have now found a very suitable new priest, Father Sam, to lead us in this new chapter of our Parish story. He will join us at the end of August.

The various issues within the wider church, and particularly around safeguarding, raised many concerns within our own church community, which led us to review our safeguarding policies, resulting in some amendment and new guidelines.

In the meantime, we have shown over the last year that we have the strength and resources within our community to keep going and growing, mainly thanks to the many members of the churches who stepped up to fill in the gaps and take on new responsibilities. Mothers Cara, Jane and Judi have performed sterling work to cover the priestly and organisational duties originally the responsibility of our Rector. We have also been blessed by several local (and some not so local) priests who have helped maintain services in the three churches.

I would also like to commend Louise and Vanessa in the office. Louise has been key to maintaining our momentum as a church. Vanessa has been doing a wonderful job to build up the Parish Rooms as an important local community resource; and has also embraced the change over to a new accounting system.

Rather than sit back and be content with simply waiting for a new Rector, dozens of people have gone the extra mile to ensure everything is well executed and quality is well maintained. Well done and THANK YOU everyone!

Peter Wells, Churchwarden

Through all the changing scenes of life

2024 will undoubtedly be remembered as the year when our rector, Father Richard Lamey, left in July, and we went into vacancy. His ministry in the parish over almost 12 years can be summed up by the words 'Christ-like', as he ministered with wisdom, grace, compassion, thoughtfulness, and holiness. These are gifts that he blessed each one of us with, and gifts that have continued to be shared amongst the congregation and in the community in the second half of the year.

But, to start at the very beginning, which is a very good place to start, it has been a full and special year, and here are some of the highlights. In January the PCC voted on the blessing of **same-sex relationships** and decided unanimously to support their

use during the main Sunday services at St Paul's or St Nick's. We also commissioned a new team of **Pastoral Visitors** for the parish, a group of people from St Paul's and St Nick's who are there to see, support, pray with and for those who need it, for whatever reason. It is a formal extension of the care that we all give and show to each other, and a great blessing to our community. It's also another form of ministry that is largely unseen to all but those who benefit from it, in that quiet, unassuming, Jesus shaped service that strengthens our faith. Thank you to all involved for all you give.

Holy Week continued on from last year's post-covid, and we returned to shoe cleaning in the market place, as well as our now regular Good Friday Messy Church and traditional Holy Week services. It feels good to have set up new regulars as well as our pre-covid regulars, and to have this as a way in which we can journey together with Jesus to the cross and to the joy of Easter Sunday.

We updated our **hymnbooks** from 'New English Hymnal' to the 'Revised English Hymnal'. This started with a February 'Songs of Praise' service sponsor a hymnbook and raise money, of which we raised MORE money than we needed, thanks to everyone's generosity. The hymnbooks were launched officially in October, and we have introduced a couple of new hymns already. The extra money raised has gone towards the much needed organ repairs.

J Club went through a period of change, as we had to move from doing J Club every week to every month. In September, we had 2 new volunteers from the congregation to lead and support, which has been wonderful, and enabled the group to meet weekly (during term time) again. **5,6,7,8**, our youth group for children in those years, ran for the first half of the year, and then came to what felt like a natural end. Sometimes it's easy to feel as though stopping an activity is giving up, or wrong somehow, as if it's against the growth that we would all like to see. But everything has a time and a season, groups of every kind have their place, serving the people who need and want it at that time. Thank you to everyone who gives their time, energy and prayers to supporting our children and families.

We continue going into schools, less over the second half of the year, but still regularly with Soulscape via **The Lounge** at The Holt, and also welcoming schools into St Paul's wherever possible. Likewise we continue with fortnightly communion at **Alexandra Grange** and **West Oak**, and a monthly joint service with Norreys Church at **Bluebell Care Home**.

Father Richard's last service was a joint parish service for all 3 churches on 14th July, which was a wonderful celebration and day as we said goodbye to the whole family. In the words of his last sermon:

"We have done some extraordinary things together. We've written a page in the history of this community and Archdeaconry which is at odds with the wider forces affecting most churches in our broad tradition. We have changed the narrative as we've grown in faith and confidence, in numbers and impact. We have shown that Churches grow when they work hard to be as kind and loving as Jesus."

After which the hard work of putting together our **Parish Profile**, which was an amazing feat and largely down to Peter Wells, thank you. Despite the huge workload involved, it does help to take a step back and reflect on what is key to the parish, what are the main features of our faith that we want to share and that keep us loving and motivated? And all of this was prepared ready to advertise in September and then readvertise in January.

In August we sadly we had to cut down another tree, the **big cedar tree** in the front of the churchyard. Again, there was some incredible behind the scenes work from the churchwardens and PCC, with surveys obtained, traffic notices arranged, and consultations. The tree removal itself was clearly noticeable, but their work in getting it done was not as visible, so thank you to everyone who gave their time and effort.

In November I very happily submitted my **final curacy paperwork** and report, ready to be signed off from curacy. I have always said that though this curacy hasn't been easy – starting in the pandemic and lockdown, without any church services at all! and my long covid - it has however, been the best curacy possible. I am so very grateful to everyone in the parish for your welcome, prayers, support, for everything you have taught me about God, church and how to be a good Christian. You have inspired me and made me a better priest and this parish is so very special, shining and shimmering with the light of Christ. Thank you.

Christmas was largely as usual, with the exception of moving the Christingle Services to the 23rd December instead of our usual Christmas Eve. We had less people attending, but overall it was a wonderful Advent and Christmas, with chance to go into Emmbrook Juniors and make Christingles, sing Advent Music, Carols in the parish rooms, Midnight Mass and Christmas Morning.

All of which is to say that this year has been both eventful and ordinary, such is the life of the church and the life of the parish. As Father Richard reminded us, we are a

community who know to take the serious things very seriously indeed, and the other things not so much. We fulfil our calling to be God's church, to care for one another, to be present in the community. We make a little pocket where the Kingdom of God is visible and tangible and gorgeous and available to all, and we do so day by day, Eucharist by Eucharist, week after week, month after month, year after year. You have made this the best curacy I could have asked for, and as we look towards next year and a new rector, they will be the luckiest parish priest to be gifted all that St Paul's and St Nick's have to offer.

Rev'd Cara Smart, Curate

Parish Life

Churchwardens' Annual Report on the Fabric of St Paul's Church 2024

In last year's Fabric Report we set out the main findings of the lengthy Quinquennial Report, which spoke very highly of our 160-year old church building. It described some extensive repair work which will need to be done in the next few years, particularly to the limestone dressings, nearly all of which need re-pointing and stone conservation, and the rainwater goods, which need to be overhauled and repaired. In the architect's words, storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. These clouds approached a little nearer in 2024, as most of our work in the second half of the year were mainly concentrated on the processes leading to the appointment of a new Rector and keeping the church running normally in the meantime.

The fabric work that is required was divided into work that can be done by:

- The Payback Team (e.g. clearing the gulleys around the church)
- Other volunteers (e.g. temporary work to the ceiling panel)
- Outside contractors (e.g. aisle roof)
- Specialist contractors (e.g. roof tiling).

A measured survey of the church was carried out. This will enable us to tender for the works that need to be done when time and finances permit. A grant to cover the cost of this survey was applied for to the Diocese. However, after granting it in principle the Diocese then said it could not be used for the measured survey. We will hopefully be able to apply it to other costs in the near future.

Since the time of the Quinquennial Inspection, it has also become apparent that repairs to the ceiling on the south side of the nave are needed. This is proving difficult to

arrange as the ceiling is too high to enable a scaffolding tower to be used. We will need to use either proper scaffolding or a scissors lift, the cost of which would mean that we would need to repair rather more than just one panel. We are working on a plan to complete the repairs.

A break-in via the South Door occurred in June. Damage was done to the door and the wall safe was also damaged, although there is thought to have been very little money in the safe at the time. Investigation revealed that the wood of the door had become very weathered, and so quotations were obtained for both the repair and restoration of the door. The door was removed during the autumn for these works to be carried out. The work was completed and the door put back in position in December. The door is now more secure and its appearance is much improved. The repair work was funded from insurance and the Restoration Fund was used for the restoration element.

The wall safe was repaired rather than replaced, in view of the small amounts of money usually deposited in it.

The PCC permitted the church building to be hired for one-off commercial events and a hire agreement was prepared and approved.

Following an accessibility audit we also moved some of the pews to provide space for wheelchairs and mobility scooters near the front of church and added white tape to the edges of steps to improve visibility. Other improvements will be continued in 2025.

David Ruddock and Peter Wells, Churchwardens

The Parochial Church Council

The PCC have had 6 main meetings since the last APCM in April 2024. At all the meetings the financial position of both the church and the Parish Rooms Trust was monitored. Other highlights are:

In May 2024, the PCC agreed the 2024 Safeguarding Policy and a proposal to move to a new system of record keeping called the Safeguarding Hub. The appointment of officers and Deputy Wardens was confirmed and a list of PCC Committees and their members was circulated. David Ruddock advised the PCC of the need to take down or substantially reduce the Cedar tree as our arboriculturalist has recommended due to the tree not being in a safe condition.

In July 2024, the PCC discussed the break in and damage to the South Door and the wallsafe and agreed that the South Door should be restored as well as repaired. The quote from AS Designs was accepted. Consideration was also given to three

quotations for the removal of the Cedar tree. It was agreed to accept the one from Parish Tree Surgery. A request had been received from St Paul's School to the Parish Rooms trust for a grant of £4,400 towards the installation of a wellness gyn in the school grounds. This was approved. The PCC said their farewells to Fr Richard and his family after 11½ years at St Paul's. Fr Richard emphasised that St Paul's is in a good place and he hoped the new Rector will bring fresh ideas. He thanked everyone for their care and support.

In September 2024, Peter Wells reported about the extensive work being carried out in creating the Parish Profile. The Profile is available on the website. Following the successful fundraising for new hymnbooks, the PCC were pleased to approve the introduction of the books to services from 6th October. We are still waiting for melody, organ and large print copies but have sufficient to begin using them. The PCC were advised that the 5-year term of Methodist ministry at Woosehill is ending in September 2025 when it will revert to Anglican ministry once again. Woosehill are seeking a priest who will do more than just services and they will be paying their own Parish Share to support this. The PCC therefore agreed to recommend to the Archdeacon that this should be a 0.5FTE + house post for 5 years.

In November 2024, the annual payments to our Mission Partners were agreed. We considered the financial report for 9 months and it was noted that the work to the Cedar tree had been completed as specified by Wokingham Borough Council. The work to restore the pedal board of the organ plus some work to the Swell Open Diapason was agreed to take place in early 2025. A proposal to hire the church to commercial hirers and the requisite documentation was considered and approved. Following the news of the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the PCC considered whether our own safeguarding policy and procedures are sufficiently robust. It was agreed to ask the Safeguarding Team to conduct a review and report to the next meeting. The PCC noted that the advert for the new Rector went out on 1st November.

In January 2025, the PCC considered the Budget for 2025 which indicated a small deficit at the year end. The PCC considered Safeguarding reports and proposals from Steffi Cetin and Vernon Riley and approved an amendment to our policy that we will notify outside agencies as well as the Diocesan Safeguarding Team when a concern arises. A revised GDPR policy and Privacy Statement was considered and approved. The PCC were advised that a new round of advertising for a new Rector is underway as no candidates came forward from the first round.

In March 2025, the PCC approved the Annual Report and Accounts 2024, the Parish Rooms Trust Report and Accounts 2024 and the Churchwarden's Report in readiness for presentation to the APCM.

In addition, two formal meetings were held to approve the process and documentation for the appointment of a new Rector. The first of these (Section 11) was held in July when the Parish Representatives were appointed and it was resolved to advertise the vacancy. The second meeting (Section 12) was held in October when the Parish Profile was approved along with supporting documents and it was agreed to advertise the post from 1st November.

Lesley Ruddock, PCC Secretary

Safeguarding

Safeguarding Team in Interregnum

Following the departure of Richard Lamey, Chris Barker and myself continued to work with Cara Smart who guided us through the interregnum, for which she has our heartfelt gratitude. Obviously, as clergy, she is and remains a member of the team. We are excited to welcome the new incumbent to the parish and to the team!

The Makin Report and Our Response

- You will be aware of the horrific abuse perpetrated by the late John Smyth and the subsequently published report by Keith Makin, which contains a number of recommendations to further limit the space for abusers within the Church of England. We ask for your continued prayers for the survivors of abuse and for guidance as we strive to make this a Safer Church for All.
- The PCC felt that we as a parish are called to review our own role in building a safer church, especially in light of the Makin Report. As a result, the PCC voted in January 2025 to introduce a subtle, but powerful change in our safeguarding policy: While our policy before stated that we would “[...]protect children and adults when a safeguarding concern of any kind arises, **following** House of Bishops guidance[...]”, we have amended this to protecting our members “**having due regard** to the House of Bishops guidance”. We felt it necessary to emancipate ourselves as a parish from having to just “follow”, and assert that ultimately we make our own calls in safeguarding, while still “having due regard” to the guidance offered by the house of Bishops.
- The policy has been amended as was decided and will be formally reviewed at the next meeting of the PCC in May 2025. Following this review the amended version will be published on the parish website.
- We are also informing our partners in the Diocese safeguarding team of this change, as a feedback.

Reporting Concerns and New Safeguarding Material

- As we reviewed our own guidance towards reporting safeguarding concerns, the question arose if other agencies, namely children's and adult social services can or should be involved. The answer is: YES, they definitely can be involved.
- Remember that a person holding a safeguarding concern should also consider their own self-care and is encouraged to seek support and advice anywhere they wish. So yes, this can mean approaching other agencies.
- If you have a safeguarding concern within the parish, you should definitely contact the Safeguarding Team, because we will need to know what we are dealing with. Other agencies can be contacted in addition. We feel that bringing in other agencies rather sooner than later, where appropriate, will help to respond better and more quickly. Our own Parish Safeguarding Policy already reflects that.
- The Safeguarding Team has developed what we hope is a clearer guideline as to whom to contact in case of a safeguarding concern, and Louise Cole has produced posters displayed in the Church and parish rooms, listing exactly who you can call. You will also find this information on our website, and there are safeguarding pocket guides available.
- Finally, please never hesitate to approach any member of the safeguarding team with any questions or ideas you might have. We are here to listen.

Parish Safeguarding Hub and Record Keeping

- In 2024, the PCC approved that part of our safeguarding records will be kept on the "Safeguarding Hub" which is connected to our Dashboard and accessible to all members of the safeguarding team.
- Thanks to Chris, our volunteers and office holders are now listed on the hub and we are able to monitor their training and DBS requirements more easily.
- It is vital that everyone who completes any kind of safeguarding training lets us (=Chris) know. **Appeal:** Please can all our hard-working and conscientious volunteers remember to keep us informed about any training, so that our records are up to date and do you justice!
- Other records, namely registers and consent forms, are being kept on-paper and under lock and key in the parish office.

Promoting a Safer Church:

Especially in light of recent scandals, but more importantly as Christians, we will continue to cultivate an atmosphere where everybody feels safe, nurtured and cherished as a person loved by God. Our biggest asset to achieve this is *you*, our parishioners, our volunteers and our friends. Your care for one another, your

integrity and your confidence to speak your thoughts and ideas is the ground, in which we can grow a Safer Church as part of the kingdom of God.

To this end, we will:

- promote a good and widely spread understanding of safeguarding, not only as protection from open abuse and neglect or from false accusation, but as the positive creation of a safe and happy environment for parishioners, office holders and paid staff.
- promote an atmosphere where anyone can speak any concern freely. Remember: Voicing a concern is not placing blame!
- advertise the appropriate contacts and encourage anyone to freely share concerns or ask questions about any aspect of safeguarding.

On a personal note, it has been absolutely heart-warming to see the eagerness and sincerity with which safeguarding is being embraced by the Parish and how energetically the PCC pushed for having clear guidance for reporting concerns and for our policy to reflect this. I feel blessed and grateful to work as PSO in such a caring and aware parish!

Stefanie Cetin, Parish Safeguarding Officer

St Nicholas' Pro-Wardens' Report

St Nicholas' Missional Vocation Statement

"Exploring through relationships and worship

how God's love is creating and sustaining communities in Emmbrook"

Our numbers still fluctuate week by week, but the congregation remain faithful, and supportive and pray for and care for each other. Due to clergy shortages and illness we unfortunately had to cancel a few services this last year.

Sunday School is offered twice a month in term time, when our faithful Sunday School leaders offer excellent teaching to our two young members.

In November we held a meeting after the service to discuss ways we could make ourselves more visible and known to the community and, what we could do for the community. Lots of good ideas were offered. Thank you to those who facilitated the meeting and to everyone who came up with ideas. Quite a few of the ideas involved using social media to advertise ourselves and our functions. Thank you to Vernon who is working hard to make sure we utilise these ideas. We do need to make sure

we continue to work on this, discern where God is leading us and hopefully grow our church.

In July Fr. Richard and family moved to pastures new. Whilst we were of course sad they were leaving us we were pleased that Fr. Richard was beginning a new and exciting part of his ministry. We shared coffee and cake with him after he led his final St. Nicholas' service, and we joined with the rest of the parish on 14th July for his final service at St. Paul's and for the celebrations that followed.

Fr. Richard was licenced in Norwich Cathedral on 15th September and some of us from St. Nicholas' joined a large group from the parish to pray for him, and with him and to wish him well. Our thanks to Fr Richard for his ministry to us and his unwavering care, encouragement and support.

In February and October, we held a reflective afternoon Taizé service followed by tea and fellowship.

In May and June our morning worship was in the form of a Café Church. After conducting a survey on these two services, it was decided a small group would get together to discuss how we could improve the format and hopefully invite others to join us.

We joined together in a shared lunch on 16th June and on 8th December a very enjoyable Patronal Festival lunch. These are always popular, enjoyable and fun events and the food is delicious.

After our Harvest Thanksgiving service on 9th September we held our usual auction of goods, raising money for the three parish charities. As always it was good fun. Thank you to our auctioneer and to everyone who brought and bought goods.

Sadly, in February our friend Pauline Dibb died. Pauline joined us after her husband died and was a generous and supportive member of our congregation.

Our fellowship groups continue to provide support and prayer in good times and bad.

St Nicholas' council meets four times a year to discuss life at St Nicholas' and how we can go forward and reach out to the community.

As always members of St Nicholas' donate very generously to the three parish charities, charitable appeals and to local charities. Many also give of their time to volunteer for various community groups and charities and on various parish committees.

Our thanks as always to Judi, Cara and Jane for their leadership, support and care and to all the visiting clergy who have helped, sometimes on the last minute, since Fr. Richard moved.

We are looking forward to welcoming, worshipping and praying with a new Rector in the not too distant future.

Thank you to every single member of the congregation for all they do in whatever way for St, Nicholas', the wider parish and the community.

Philippians 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Liz Gallagher and Fiona Albinson, Pro Wardens

Woosehill Church Report

This has been a quiet year with little outreach work done except that we hold a service each month for the residents in the lounge at Kennet Court, where sadly numbers are dwindling. Our Thursday morning coffee and knit or craft or just chat continues as does Sip and Share the 2nd Saturday of each month.

We are short of children and are beginning to look at ways to re-engage with them. It is a pity that the contact with the Hawthorns School is minimal. We only have a few families with children who attend and they either sit with their parents or use the table set with crayons and Roots material. Our annual Crib service on Christmas Eve children's service saw 120 attendees. The Tadpoles carer and child group continues to flourish with a waiting list to join.

Our numbers attending regularly average about 30 plus with a few following online each week. Our services are still 3 weeks with Methodist leaders both ordained and lay and one service led by the parish and Café church on the 5th Sunday of the month

The church members enjoy joining in with the parish quizzes etc. Our WoW (Women of Woosehill church) group continues to flourish with a meeting each month with an activity or event, it is good to get to know each other better.

Lynn Smith, Woosehill church representative on the PCC

Changes in the Electoral Roll

A complete revision of the Electoral Roll occurs every six years and it is natural that numbers fall at this time for various reasons. Following a complete revision of the Electoral Roll this year, the total number admitted by 3rd April 2025 now stands at 179.

The number of persons on the Roll on 31st March 2024 stood at 231.

Teri Austen, Electoral Roll Officer

Stewardship Report

We are grateful to all the St. Paul's and St. Nick's Parishioners who continue to strongly support the Church through regular planned giving and through one off or occasional donations. Planned regular giving allows the Church to budget effectively and manage cash flow so if you are able to and you wish to support the Church with a regular donation a please consider doing this through the Parish Giving scheme.

The majority of our regular donors now give via the Parish Giving Scheme which is run by the diocese who claim Gift Aid on all eligible donations on behalf of the Church. Another important benefit of the scheme is that it allows donors to index link their gift to maintain its value to the Church over time. I'd like to encourage donors who still give by Standing Order or numbered envelopes to consider switching to scheme. A link with details on how to join the scheme can be found on the Parish website.

We continue to collect via the plate during services for those wishing to give by gift aid envelopes or cash and also from the wall safe near the font.

Recognising that many people no longer carry cash, we also have a card reader at the back of the Church for use during the services.

We are also able to receive donations by text. This can be done by texting STPAULS5 or STPAULS10 or STPAULS20 to 70450 to donate that amount of money with an option to gift aid the donation. If you are a UK taxpayer, then we can claim Gift Aid equal to the standard rate of income tax on the value of any gifts given to the Church. Gift Aid provides an extremely valuable contribution to the Church's annual income so if you can Gift Aid your donation, please complete a declaration form available from myself at the email address below. Thank you to those who have previously completed a Gift Aid declaration form but if your circumstances have changed and you are no longer paying UK income tax then please inform me. If you have moved house recently, please could you also complete a new form with your new address.

If anyone has any questions about the Parish Giving Scheme, stewardship or Gift Aid then do please contact me at Church or via email at stewardship@spauls.org.uk

Stuart Fairhead, Stewardship Secretary

The Churchyard

We enjoy the help from the Probation Service Payback group as well as a few volunteers from the congregation, although this volunteer contingent is decreasing but needs to be enhanced by enthusiastic new churchyarders. We could do with a Quartermaster to keep the shed tidy and the tools in good shape (there can be lots of

help from other volunteers as needed), a biodiversity champion and a tree champion who can maintain a continuous survey of the trees – the last fully completed survey was in 2017. Refreshments are regularly provided.

Following on from the reduction of the old Oak just after Christmas in 2023, this year we had to have the big Cedar of Lebanon cut back but were asked by the council to retain a stump. This has recently been surrounded by 5 rambling roses, which we hope will grow up and provide a show of flowers in midsummer. There has been planted 2 Rambling Rector roses, 2 Paul's Himalayan musk rose and one Banksia lutea rose which is thornless and flowers a little later than the others. Hopefully these five new roses will grow quickly and provide a good show of flowers over a longer period than just one variety would have done. Unfortunately at some point we will need to remove the remaining stump so it does not damage the graves which surround it.

We have repaired the shed that was broken into last year and provided further padlocks to make it more difficult to enter.

During this year the churchyard has continued to be looked after and continues to receive very positive comments from the local community.

The volunteers have managed to maintain the chipper and make it functional so we are now able to chip much of the tree waste we generate in the churchyard. The chipped waste has been successfully used to maintain the paths in the churchyard. This means we no longer have bonfires, which are unpopular and release significant carbon into the atmosphere. So we have done a bit to reduce our contribution to climate change.

We have also started to invest in battery powered machines to manage the churchyard although we still do use petrol and diesel in the chipper and mowers since available battery mowers are currently unsuitable for all day use. Material which previously we might have burnt but which is unsuitable for the chipper, is being composted and the leaves, which fall in the autumn, are collected to produce leaf mould. We have been using much of the compost to level out the ground in the churchyard but there is plenty of good quality compost and leaf mould available for anyone who cares to come and collect it for themselves. Please contact churchyard@spauls.org.uk for details if required.

We are pleased to welcome schools into the Churchyard to support their local community as well as a return to St Paul's for the St Paul's Scout group. We have also hosted students from Chiltern Way Academy. The churchyard is clearly an excellent way to reach out to the local community as well as our very long term and successful link with the probation service.

The trees we planted as part of the Tree Succession Project are growing nicely. As is the Medlar tree which has been planted by Wokingham WI near the Parish rooms. It has provided a good show of blossoms and colourful leaves as well as a supply of medlar fruits this year if anyone has an interest in using the fruit this year please contact churchyard@spauls.org.uk

We are still looking out for Ash Die Back, or Chalara (*hymenoscyphus fraxineus*), but so far it seems to have missed the churchyard trees. If our Ash trees are affected we will need to remove them. It is this threat that we are addressing with the planting of new trees which will take over when the inevitable happens (over 95% of the Ash trees in the UK, *fraxinus excelsior*, are expected to succumb to the disease eventually).

The tree survey which was carried out in 2017, is now being re-run by the churchyard volunteers, to make sure that our trees are kept in good order, pruned and removed, as necessary. Half of the trees have been surveyed so far and the rest will be done over the next few months.

The drains around the Church and Parish Rooms car park still need repairing. This work was being planned a couple of years ago but the project was delayed by the pandemic. I would be pleased to hear recommendations of suitable contractors (churchyard@spauls.org.uk), since this is something which needs to be revisited to keep the drainage system, around the church, in good working order.

There has been a lot of work done over the past couple of years to remove the old spoil heap on the south side of the churchyard. This has provided new grave space and we are indebted to one of our volunteers, Tom Gemmill, who has spent hours managing and maintaining the area. Tom has reseeded this part of the churchyard but we may need to reseed areas which are looking thin.

If you are pleased with the way the churchyard looks and would like to help to maintain it to its current standard, please come and join us. We really do need more people to mow the grass, manage the compost, maintain and document the graves, tend our trees, look after our wildlife, mend our machines, provide refreshments and more. If this is you, please join us any time from 9.00-16.00 on alternate Saturdays, visit the website (<https://spauls.co.uk/churchyard-working-party/>) or email churchyard@spauls.org.uk for more information. We share the payback group with All Saints Church which is why we have churchyard working party every fortnight.

Andy Clark, Churchyard Manager

Mustard Seeds

Specific missional activities have been fewer in 2024, mainly due to fewer people being available to organise and participate, and being in vacancy. Nevertheless, a few points are worth noting:

- As developed in 2022-23, we continued the approach of looking for missional opportunities within other planned events, rather than have specifically missional events.
- For St Paul's, early 2024 had a strong focus on fundraising. We considered missional opportunities around fundraising for hymn books and tree

pruning. However, we decided not to pursue these in case we lost sight of the specific call for funds.

- As in 2023, we were ready to carry out shoe cleaning in the Marketplace on Maundy Thursday, but, unfortunately, the weather intervened and the market was closed due to high winds. Thanks are due to those who were “on standby” until quite late on the Wednesday before cancellation was confirmed.
- Relationships with our charities have deepened further. More members of our congregations now volunteer regularly for Soulscape (<https://soulscape.org.uk/>); The Lounge is now in its second year at The Holt School and is well-attended. HomeStart (<https://home-startwd.org.uk/>) and Soulscape have promoted and assisted in Messy Easter events.
- We donated a total of £6108 to our three charities in 2024.
- As we are in vacancy, the current 3 year cycle for charity funding was extended to 4 years. We are using the additional time to review the system we have in place and the process by which we come up with a recommendation.
- Outreach is something many people do, of course, not just the Mustard Seeds. For example, the choir sang Christmas carols at two care homes during Advent and at Wokingham Hospital for the first time. Good Friday Messy Church was again well supported, with the event attracting families who aren't “regulars” in our congregations.

Mustard Seeds are looking forward to working with our new Rector to re-invigorate our missional work to help us grow in service to our local communities, spiritual commitment to our Lord and numbers in our congregations.

Paul Armitage

Spirituality Report

Paul Armitage has reported on Missional aspects of church life in his report for the Mustard Seeds, leaving me to focus on matters spiritual.

It is important, I think, to balance the two. Without spiritual input – found in regular times of quiet reflection, worship and holy communion in company with others, private study and prayer -- we cannot function effectively as ambassadors of Jesus, loving our neighbours, feeding the hungry, visiting the lonely ...

We are fortunate indeed to be well fed at St Paul's with St Nicholas (spiritually as well as by the Social Committee!) Our faith has been nurtured by a wonderful selection of priests from around the Deanery and beyond (especially since Fr Richard moved to Norwich).

In 2024

- services took place regularly (including Morning Prayer on Zoom three times a week and twice in church), with “extras” such as Stations of the Cross and midweek festivals at appropriate times
- the choir continue to flourish and inspire,
- J-Club has been invigorated by some new volunteers,
- Tithings and prayer and/or study groups continue to meet,
- a monthly meditation group has been meeting under the leadership of Susannah Riley, and will include some teaching in 2025.

For all this, and many other blessings, we can only thank those who have served us and praise Almighty God, our loving father.

It has been my privilege to assist with Communion by Extension, care home communions and “house bound” communions over the year. Following the success of guided Quiet Days in 2022 and 2023 and a weekend retreat at St Columba’s led by Roy Burgess in 2023, Fr Richard Lamey and Revd Becky Medlicott offered a Quiet Day *Why stillness* at St James Finchampstead early in 2024. In September the three churches of the parish joined in a morning of prayer for our parish in vacancy.

The call to discipleship is precious and it matters, personally and corporately, that we are all putting time and energy and prayer into deepening our relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Do watch out for emails about Quiet Days and Retreats taking place within the parish and elsewhere. If you are keen to deepen your spirituality, there are many ways to explore. Do ask about them.

Mary Cassidy

Social Committee

MARRIAGE PREP DAY 16th March 2024

Around 20 people. We served Coffee and Danish on arrival and a light lunch of sandwiches, nibbles, cake and fruit for our couples.

EASTER SUNDAY BREAKFAST 31st March - Donations £178

85 signed up. A busy morning for the Committee serving breakfast from 7 am through to 11 am. We Deducted our expenses of £167 from the Donations, which were disappointing this year.

CHRISTIAN AID COFFEE MORNING. 18th May - A profit of £325 to Christian Aid.

Food wise, An easy, enjoyable event for the Committee. We charged £1.50 for drinks, £3 for cake and a drink.

CONFIRMATION REFRESHMENTS 19th May

We were advised approx 150 would attend the Service with Bishop Olivia but no more than 70 stayed for refreshments in the Parish Rooms afterwards so unfortunately we did over cater. Sandwiches were bought from Costco.

BBQ 23rd June - A profit of £659 for General Church Funds.

84 people enjoyed the afternoon, yet again a lovely sunny day. Many helpers came forward with all the setting up and clearing away. Our Chefs Nigel and Chris worked wonders with the sausages and burgers. The chicken and burgers were from Costco and thanks to Pauline and Peter Wells for driving Trish to the store and the use of their card. The sausages were Outdoor Bred Pork from Waitrose. Always enjoyable, a great event for the Parish.

FATHER RICHARD'S FAREWELL 14th July - Donations of £60 for General Church Funds.

We eventually convinced Richard to have an Afternoon Tea in the Parish Rooms, this was plan B really as there was no way of predicting the weather for the lunch time event at the school field and anyway this wouldn't have been suitable for all age groups. An amazing response with well over 100 attending, fortunately we could overspill into the garden. The Congregation were very generous with cakes, scones and sandwiches. It was a great send off for Richard.

HARVEST LUNCH 6th October - Profit made of £699 a fifty fifty split between our Charities and General Church Funds.

60 attended our vegetarian lunch celebrating Harvest, we served a choice of 9 dishes with new potatoes and potato & parsnip mash, followed of course by desserts. An occasion for good fellowship.

ALL SOULS 3rd November

Refreshments in the Parish Rooms, wine and nibbles. Father Richard was keen to meet up after the Service, particularly with the newly bereaved in mind. Around 30 attended.

AUTUMN BAZAAR 9th November - £425 for General Church Funds

Numbers were down reflected in the stalls' takings. However, the Lunches and Afternoon Tea and Cake did well.

9 NINE LESSONS & CAROLS 22nd December

Always a wonderful service attended by many. Mulled wine (16 bottles), mince pies, stollen and nibbles always appreciated.

JANUARY LUNCH 12th January 2025 - A profit of £476 for General Church Funds

Another very popular event catering for 70. A good time was had by all.

PARISH QUIZ 8th February - Profit of £336 for General Church Funds + Raffle run by Mary Cassidy making £177

St Nicks and Woosehill Churches had their own teams, all very competitive and great fun. This is an expensive event food wise, (Fish, chicken, sausage supper) with food costs of £550. A bumper event, 80 people. (All keen to win!)

LENT LUNCH (provided by Social Committee & MU) 8th March

Donations for our 3 Charities of £290 Cash plus a smaller sum on the Card Machine (amount tba).

47 attended for our traditional lunch of Soup, Bread & Cheese, we were delighted to have the Rev'd Jane with us.

Trish Gatland / Social Committee

Bellringers

We are actively seeking new members as most of our members have now reached retiring age: despite this Sunday service and Tuesday practice ringing was maintained except for a few times where insufficient ringers were available during the holiday season. All weddings requesting bells were accommodated. A peal was rung for the Feast of St. Nicholas and quarter peals were rung for the Deanery Confirmation service and half muffled for All Souls and Remembrance Sunday. In addition, several visiting bands and area practices were catered for.

If you wish to find out more or join us please contact me at kr.davenport@outlook.com. There is also a website for the Oxford Diocese at <http://https://odg.org.uk/>. There are also several videos on Youtube under "change ringing".

Ken Davenport, Tower Captain

Mothers Union

2024 has been an interesting and somewhat eventful year. The branch kicked off the New Year with the usual Epiphany Party, followed by the AGM in February. Activities throughout the year were varied, combining a mixture of talks and fellowship meetings, prayer days and services. Talks on the History of the MU, Challenging the Narrative and a presentation by the Rev John Edwards were well received and the latter speaker has been invited back for another presentation. We have been joined by the members of All Saints branch of the MU and the Union of Catholic Mothers for a number of our talks and reciprocated by attending their meetings.

As in previous years, the MU assisted the Social Committee at the Lent Lunch, providing homemade soups and extra provisions. The branch ran a well-stocked stall at the Autumn Bazaar and, although the attendance overall was lower than last year, it was considered a reasonably successful event.

The branch outing to Swallowfield Church in August was very enjoyable. We were introduced to their incumbent and his wife, then given a most interesting talk from the churchwarden on the history of the church. After spending a good amount of time exploring the building and its environs, we made our annual visit to Riseley Tea Rooms; this is definitely becoming a tradition! The afternoon ended with a violent storm (whilst we were safely inside, I may add!) but the journey home was fraught with copious amounts of rain and flooded areas.

After we had a request from Bluebell House Care Home for regular visits to chat and carry out some activities with their residents, two or three members have been popping in for an hour or so on a monthly basis. Two members also took along some of our chocolate-stuffed Christmas stockings and set up a small stall at their Christmas Fair in November; it didn't raise much in the way of funds, but it was an entertaining day.

Very sadly, we have lost three of our members this year: Janet Wickham, Jan Norbury and Margaret Eves. Janet had been in a care home for some time and had been unwell for a while, but both Jan's and Margaret's illnesses were short and their deaths have been a shock to the members. Apart from the personal loss and grief this has caused, it also brings home the dire need for some younger members if the branch is to survive.

Some of our members went to the Spring Meeting at St Nicolas', Earley, where we learnt about various aspects of Safeguarding. It has been really useful to have help from our members to fill knitted chicks with eggs and stockings with chocolate shapes. Thank you everyone.

Finally, may we thank those members who have regularly attended and contributed to the life of this branch. Special thanks go to the Rev Jane for her spiritual commitment to us.

Teri Austen

Meditation Group

The group has thrived this year and we continue to meet monthly, on the 2nd Tuesday each month. By popular consent we have changed venue to the Rapsey Room, St Paul's Parish Rooms, for the colder months (October to April). We will be back in St Paul's May to September.

In January, as part of our usual meetings, we started a series of teaching sessions based on WCCM (World Community of Christian Meditation) material. The first session was well attended with some new people joining us.

We are open to anyone of Christian, other faith, or none. If you would like to join us do just come along or contact me meditationgroup@spauls.org.uk

Susannah Riley

The Wider View

Deanery Synod Report

It's certainly been a year of significant change in Sonning Deanery.

In July 2024, Revd Richard Lamey moved on, after serving for as Area Dean for six years (and five years before that as Associate Area Dean). We continue to give thanks for how generously and fairly Richard served all the churches in our Deanery. He was warmly thanked and given a gift at his final Synod meeting in June 24.

The Bishop of Reading asked Revd Julian Bidgood (Barkham) to serve as Deanery Co-ordinator from July 24 and he has been working alongside John Sutton, Leigh Welham, and Lynne Paine (who thankfully continued in their posts as Lay Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer respectively). Revd Jane Kraft, Anna Pearce, Revd Laura Wheatley-Downes, Revd Andy Kearns, and David Horrocks have also continued to serve as members of the Deanery Standing Committee and Mission and Pastoral Committee.

It's also been a year of change in many of our churches. At the time of 2024 APCMs, there were incumbent vacancies in five of our then twelve (now thirteen) benefices: Arborfield and Barkham, All Saints Wokingham, Finchampstead and California, Hurst, Ruscombe and Twyford, and Winnersh and Bearwood. Revd Laura

Wheatley-Downes (St John's Crowthorne) was also on maternity leave from April 24-January 25. Since then we have also said farewell to Revd John Cook (who retired as Rector of Wargrave and Knowl Hill in June), Revd Richard Lamey (who also moved on from his role at St Paul's and Woosehill in July), and Revd Catherine Vaughan (who moved on from Owlsmoor in September).

But it hasn't all been farewells! We are glad to have welcomed Revd Hannah Higginson into her new role as Rector of all Saints Wokingham (July), Revd Andy Kearns into his new role as Rector of Arborfield and Barkham (October), Revd Mark Gould as Vicar of Ruscombe and Twyford (September), Revd Patrick Mukholi as Vicar of Winnersh and Bearwood (February), Revd Hugh Thomas as Vicar (House for Duty) of Hurst (March), and Revd Gemma Donnell as Rector of Finchampstead and California (April). So we end the year with just three incumbent vacancies, at St Paul's and Woosehill, Wargrave and Knowl Hill, and Owlsmoor (see below). It's possible that there may be further news on some of these posts before the time of the APCMs.

With so many changes taking place, there has understandably been a limit to the amount that the Deanery has been able to do over this last year.

One particular focus has been the future of Owlsmoor. A small group from the Mission and Pastoral Committee worked closely with the Wardens, the PCC and the Diocese, to look at possible options for the future staffing of that church family following Catherine's departure. This work continues and the vacancy there has now been suspended for five years to enable further consideration of these options.

We have also spent time considering our churches' and other local ministry among Children and Young People (following Bishop Stephen's lead), Parish Share (as we continue to implement the new ways of calculating what different benefices should pay), and environmental matters (with the Standing Committee agreeing a number of grants to churches who have applied to the increasingly-used Deanery Green Fund). In September 24, we were also joined by Revd Liz Jackson (Associate Archdeacon) who led a very thought-provoking session on 'Welcoming the Stranger' (informed particularly by her significant experience in leading and helping churches in welcoming and supporting refugees, including from Hong Kong and Ukraine).

In November 24, we took note of the (inevitably limited) progress that we had made on our 2024 Deanery Plan. We agreed to continue with this same plan in 2025, as well as continuing the ongoing work on the Plan for Children and Young People and (for obvious reasons) focusing on settling new clergy into the Deanery. The Standing Committee will also begin to consider what might be included in a potentially more ambitious plan for subsequent years, and will be seeking suggestions from PCCs about this too.

In summary, it's been an interesting year. We give thanks to the Lord for the way he has grown relationships across the Deanery and between our churches through so many changes. And we look forward to a little more stability in 2025.

Julian Bidgood, Sonning Deanery Coordinator

Sweden Report

We remain in a comfortable place with our parish link with Sweden. Until his departure in July 2024, Fr Richard continued to maintain regular contact with Johannes Grimheden at Mariakyrkan. Since then, Johnannes has taken on a broader role as the lead parish priest for all the parishes in western Växjö. Services at Mariakyrkan are now regularly led by Victor Hjort with support from Richard Grügiel.

Since the natural development of our parish link was disrupted by the Covid pandemic, we have taken steps over the last year to re-establish a broader awareness of our twin parish in Växjö. We have mounted a large display at the back of St Paul's Church for benefit of both parishioners and visitors. A booklet about Mariakyrkan was also produced to provide parishioners, who haven't visited our twin parish, with an opportunity to find out more about it.

We should endeavour to stay in touch, to pray for each other and the strengthening of the connection between us. It is now ten years since this link started and that gives us an opportunity to do something this year to develop the link with Mariakyrkan.

Välsignelser till våra vänner i vår tvillingförsamling i Växjö.

Andrew Harte