

## **APCM 2024**

### **Chair's Address**

*Interim Chair James Whitehouse, Associate Vicar Jon Tattersall & Curate Jo Jennings*

We give thanks to God for His goodness and protection over us, and where we are as a Church just now. There have been many encouragements in 2023 and in the start of 2024, and we continue in good heart and in a good place together. We are however, in a season of transition following Leonard's retirement in January, as we wait on God – aided by the recruitment process which is well underway – for our next vicar to be appointed. So, it seems right to take a slightly different approach to the Chairman's address this year; and I have asked Jo – our Curate – to give her review of where we are just now, and Jon – our Associate Vicar – to give his view of what the Lord has and is saying about the immediate future. Jon, can I invite you up to share what God has put on your heart for this time.

Good evening everyone. What a wonderful delight it has been to read through the APCM report, noting the blessings we have received over the past year, and also the challenges that we are facing. Both of those realities – the blessings and the challenges – should remind us that we need to keep returning to a faithful God in gratitude for all that we see him doing, and in prayer for all we would love to see him still do amongst us.

In the next minutes, I want to speak into where we are as a church during this time of vacancy. Jo Jennings our curate will then speak helpfully to the specific ways in which God is working amongst us through our bridge-building ministries, GPS work, new people coming into the life of our church and more importantly – into faith in Jesus.

Before that though, I want to take you back to 2020 and those strange and I imagine for many, thankfully distant days of the pandemic. During that time, our garden needed sorting out, and something called a 'Rotovator' was hired to help prepare the garden for a new lawn to be laid. It was great fun seeing that machine at work – churning up the soil, breaking hard ground up, making it easier to remove weeds, oxygenating the soil, removing large rocks, and readying it for a season of new planting and growth. The more I reflect on the church I left in 2014 to train for ordination,

and the church I rejoined in 2019 and the subsequent years, the more I feel that is what God has done with St John's through the ministry of Leonard and Alison, and their time with us. It just feels like the ground is ready. That the Lord has been rotovating us - removing that which needed to be removed, bringing oxygen and breathing life into us again, readying the ground.

Listeners of my recent sermons might note that I've been greatly impacted recently by the prophet Ezekiel and his words to a nation who had lost their way. Words of warning to start with, but words of the promise of restoration and life. One of the most famous passages in his book is perhaps in chapter 37 and the valley of the dry bones. I read that through recently and what stood out to me, as Ezekiel is led towards this valley full of bones, is the question that the Lord asks him in that place. "Son of man, can these bones yet live?" To our eyes - absolutely not! These bones are dry bones - no flesh is on them, they've remained dormant for years, scorched by the sun. To our eyes we might say - no way. But as the passage goes on to explain - when the word of God is spoken, and the breath of God is breathed into dry bones - the answer to that question - 'can these bones yet live' - is emphatically, categorically, absolutely - when God enters the equation - yes.... these bones can live! His word. His Spirit. will always bring his LIFE.

That's what I see when I read through the APCM report - signs of life, new growth and regrowth everywhere! Whether it's in our Sunday gatherings, generational ministries, our recovery course, repair cafe or any of our bridge-building ministries - we are seeing amongst all the challenges and difficulties of this cultural moment - signs of life everywhere!

Perhaps we might see the rejuvenation of St Mary's as an extension of this - our heart to see life breathed into other places beyond our own walls is an important aspect of St John's identity - past, present and future. It has been wonderful to see the life and growth continue in Bearwood and the work Ben and St Mary's are engaged with there, for sake of the Kingdom. And closer to home, we've seen some important changes in our staff team, with members of staff moving on and some joining our team. We've said goodbye to Jon, Fran, Patty and of course Leonard. We've said a very enthusiastic hello to Ed Justa our facilities manager and Ruth Bio our

safeguarding coordinator. We are grateful to all of our staff for the hard work they have put in, supporting so many people and each one playing their part in helping to make Jesus known in Harborne and beyond.

I'm going to invite Jo to come and share more insight into the ways we are seeing God move across the life of our church...

In this time of vacancy, it's been important to fix our eyes closely on Jesus, as we head into a time of advertising, shortlisting, interviewing and potentially appointing a new incumbent. But we must keep looking to Jesus here and now - After all - this is his church, and he loves and cares for this church far more than any of us do. His promise - that he will build his church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it - is something we can hold onto and stand upon during this time of vacancy. That's why we have been focusing during our Sunday gatherings on the Sermon on the Mount - that when we look to Jesus, and look at how he asks those who follow him to live, and when we step out in faith in expectation that when we do that we will find solid ground for our feet - then we will see that even in a season of vacancy - that these bones can yet live.

That's my prayer for this season going forwards as we wait for our next incumbent. That we would realise that when God's word is spoken, heard and believed in, and when God's breath breathes over us and into us - we would experience LIFE in all fullness flowing into us, surrounding us, and through us into the world around us.

During a time away at the New Wine Leaders Conference this year - an incredible time of blessing and refreshment for the staff team - an unfamiliar song caught my ear. It's called 'O God would you move' - written and released by the team at KXC church in London. These words resounded in my ears and brought tears to my eyes. "We've prayed our prayers, we've made our plans, But if You're not in it, we don't want it, O God, would You move". I think that's a pretty good prayer for us during this time of Vacancy and beyond. If you're not in it, we don't want it, O God would you move".

Jo shared a verse with me recently from Proverbs 16. 'Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans'. I love the way Jo put it -

she said this "It doesn't mean that all our plans and ideas have to be perfect, God can work with even the tiniest seed, but we are to commit them to Him." And so we say Lord - in all that we say and do, in all that we pray and plan - would we fix your eyes on you Jesus. Help us to want what you want. Because if you're not in it, we don't want it. Oh God, would you move. Can these bones yet live? We say yes they can Lord - when your word is heard and taken in deeper to our lives. When your Spirit breathes into us. That is what you are looking for Lord. A people who are hungry for you, desperate for you to move, so the lost can come home, find life, find freedom, find healing, find hope in you. For your glory King Jesus, we ask this. Amen.

Good evening! Its been lovely for me to spend some time over the last few days reflecting on all that has been happening in the life of St Johns over the past year. Every week, those who are leading services point newcomers and visitors to the hello and welcome cards and the people who are connectors. And every time we do this, we say there is much to be aware of in the day to day life of St Johns. We are certainly not a church that only operates on a Sunday. If you enter our building on pretty much any given day you will see such a variety of ministries taking place. And over the next few minutes, I just want to highlight some of the things that have brought joy and challenge to the life of this church.

Last year I reported on our bridge building ministries. Some of these ministries were only just taking off at the last APCM and this year its a delight to report that we are seeing much fruit being born out of our bridge building ministries and have been excited to see development and growth in so many of our bridges into the community.

Mondays are definitely one of the busiest days in church. As the staff team finish their meetings and head out, it's wonderful to hear and see the busy atmosphere of English language classes, which are reaching out to more and more people and the buzz of the warm space. The ability of our church family to be able to provide language classes, primarily to Ukrainian women who have fled their country, has been such an aid in helping them to settle in a new country and to find their dignity and worth once again. Warm spaces is reaching out to those who have not only been affected by the cost of living crisis but who also have felt lonely and in need of

companionship. The love of Jesus is being shown through the simplicity of conversation and hospitality and we are beginning to see those who use warm spaces attend our midweek and Sunday gatherings which beautifully reflects the image of the two way bridge.

Friday night dinner continues to thrive, now feeding between 50 and 80 people. There have been joyful stories of God's provision in catering and great connections in conversation, leading to people being brought into other offerings such as The Chosen Group. Community café continues on a Saturday morning and has branched out into hosting a repair café and the life admin team. The Repair Café has taken off very quickly. Offering a service that can try and repair, recycle or renew items has drawn in many people from right across our city. The underpinning vision of God as the master restorer makes this a unique and different place from other repair shops.

Celebrate Recovery is a place that offers, through a process, a transformation in people's lives. It was a joy this week to hear that two people who have journeyed through celebrate recovery not only found transformation in their lives but have also been baptised. What a wonderful testament to God's redeeming and transformative love.

As we constantly remind ourselves, these ministries do not exist just to make our community a better place or so that our building is full in the week, they exist because we are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus on the ground and to proclaim the gospel in this place. We have seen God's hands on all the ideas and plans for bridge building and in this we rejoice. Of course, none of these could happen without an amazing bank of volunteers and so I take this opportunity to thank each of you who volunteer not just for bridge building but for all the other groups and ministries that happen here. Thank you for being so willing to use your gifts and talents to further usher in the kingdom of God.

We have rejoiced in the number of new people that are attending St Johns, particularly in our Thursday midweek service and on a Sunday morning. We have rejoiced in the ever increasing diversity of our congregation, however, we acknowledge that there is still work to do for full representation of who we are as a church.

We are so blessed to have such a strong children's and youth ministry. To see our children on the dais every week leading us in worship through actions and signs is a joy. Our youth stream is strong and growing. There is a lovely sense of togetherness and unity on a Sunday evening as they gather to study scripture and then to continue to worship at our 6pm service. We are so blessed to be a church that is strong in intergenerational ministry, and we are also blessed to have a wonderful, dedicated team of volunteers who have been called into helping our children and youth learn more about God and what he offers each of us. Of course, the challenge, like many churches and ministries, is a shortage of volunteers. We simply cannot offer the range of groups without additional volunteers; as we begin to think about new youth coming up, we need to recruit a number of people, from all ages, who would be willing to draw alongside our young people, particularly in their midweek groups. Maybe God is nudging you this evening to have a conversation about what it might look like to volunteer to help with our children and youth ministry. It is our responsibility to nurture and teach our children, it has been said that it takes a church to raise children in faith and so please do come and have a conversation with me or our youth pastor Henry if you feel the nudge from God.

Our Global Partner Support (GPS) initiative has continued throughout the year. A small but dedicated group of people work together to support our mission partners both long term and short term, here in the UK and around the world. However, the decline in both short and long term mission has been seen in the last few years. The GPS team have noted that we now have no short term mission partners and our long term mission partners are getting to the age where retirement is on the horizon. The landscape of Christian missionary work has changed and evolved over the years reflecting socio-political changes and cultural shifts around the world. Mission agencies are finding it difficult to balance the books and find people to serve.

We, as a church, are committed to mission, but there are significant challenges ahead. This year Patty McCulloch, a long serving member of the GOS team has stepped down from her role supporting our long term mission partners. We are delighted that Jane Butcher has agreed to take over from Patty, but we would love to expand the team further and are especially eager to recruit younger members and those who can help with

communication and the profile of GPS. If mission work is on your heart, then we would love to hear from you, but do please be praying for the team and our mission partners as we press in and discern from God what mission might look like in the next season at St John's.

This really is just a snapshot of the joys and challenges that we have experienced this year, there could be so much more to say, but I do encourage you to read the various APCM ministry reports for this year. There is much to look back on and celebrate and more for us to partner with God in over the next year. In all that we do here, we continue to trust in God, who loves this church much more than we do and to place our hands in his as he leads us into a new season.