

Chairman's Report to the Parish November 5th 2017

Good evening, everyone, and welcome to this year's AGM. Thank you for coming out on a dark November evening to celebrate all that is good about our parish and to be reminded of the huge range of contributions many people make to our community.

I would like to begin by quoting some very wise words from St John-Paul that, for me, go to the heart of what our parish community is about. He writes:

'Many people today are disorientated and lost in search of genuine fellowship. Often their lives are either too superficial or shattered by brokenness. Their work often is dehumanizing. They long for an experience of genuine encounter with others, for true fellowship. Well, is this not precisely the vocation of a parish? Are we not called to be a warm, brotherly family together? Are we not people united together in the household of God through our common life?

'Your parish is not mainly a structure, a geographical area or a building. The parish is first and foremost a community of the faithful. This is the task of a parish today: to be a community, to rediscover its identity as a community. You are not a Christian all by yourself. To be a Christian means to believe and to live one's faith together with others. For we are all members of the body of Christ. For fellowship to grow, the priest's role is not enough, even though he plays an essential role. The commitment of all parishioners is needed. Each of their contributions is vital.'

This is a good moment to thank everyone who serves our parish community in any way, whether it be in our worship, teaching, pastoral care, youth work or financial matters, or on the social side, building up that sense of fellowship referred to by St John-Paul. I am conscious that, in the course of what must necessarily be a short speech, I will inevitably miss out events and contributions that meant a great deal to those involved. I apologise for this in advance and hope that no-one will feel that their contribution has been overlooked.

It is fitting to start by remembering some of the many contributions made by Fr Phil to our parish over the last two years. He enriched our liturgical celebrations, took parishioners on pilgrimage and devoted much of his time to youth ministry with the children and parents of St Edmund's school, OLA and the parish youth groups. We wish Fr Phil all the very best in his new ministry in Portsmouth and are grateful to Bishop Philip for presenting us with another gift in the form of Fr. Rob. We welcome Fr. Rob and hope that his stay in the parish will be a happy and fulfilling one.

Mention of the younger members of the parish brings me to Melanie, our youth worker, who has energetically built up her ministry in the parish and the wider pastoral area. The future of St Edmund's depends on such dedicated service and we are all grateful for the immense contribution Melanie has made over the last year. The impressive report she presented to the PPC in October was testimony to this. Melanie was involved with the staff, parents and pupils of OLA and St Edmund's school as they brought their 'Heart of Light' project to a glorious conclusion last November, with 12,000 of candles being lit on OLA's tennis courts. The project raised more than £6,400 for CAFOD and Rutsya School in Uganda.

OLA also worked with Sue Richards and her volunteers to gather in unwanted goods donated by parishioners as part of the Mary's Meals 'Rags to Riches' campaign.

The faith journey of our young people continues to be at the centre of what we do as a parish. Errol Midwinter and his team once again devoted their Saturday mornings to preparing our Year 3 children for their First Holy Communion and there was also a group that travelled down to the cathedral for Confirmation. Adults had their annual opportunity to embrace the fullness of the faith through the RCIA, Called and Gifted and Alpha programmes.

Without prayer and the sacraments, our parish would quickly wither and die, and the ministry of our Charismatic prayer group, prayer ministry team, Mothers' Prayers and Scripture Group remain central to our mission. The regular cycle of Sunday and weekday Masses, Confessions, Eucharistic Adoration, Rosary and other devotions provides the rhythm of prayer that enables our parish to flourish so vibrantly. Young people are also involved here, through their ministry as servers and as contributors to the musical life of the parish. The dignity and beauty of our worship has been augmented this year by the wonderful work that has been undertaken to renew the Sacristy, making it a more fitting place for the reservation of the church's vestments and sacred vessels.

As ever, parishioners were generous this year in putting their faith into action. Fundraising causes embraced included Save the Children, the Friends of the Holy Land – where more than £2,200 was raised – and 'Light for the Blind', Fr Thomas's charity in Tamil Nadu. £5,500 was given for this, a further sign of parishioners' commitment to the poorest of the poor. Generous donations were made to CAFOD through the Lent and Harvest appeals. Our annual Lenten fundraising raised £7,500 for Headway, Oxfordshire, a charity based in Kennington and, through the International Tree Foundation, for the Bamenda tree planting project. The total raised was shared equally between the two charities. All this is in line with our annual renewal of the parish's Covenant with the Poor, which continues to bear fruit so wonderfully in many practical ways.

Pope Francis's plea in his encyclical letter 'Laudato Si' for us all to take better care of God's creation was answered principally this year through the CAFOD 'Live Simply' campaign* (report published separately) Every month a report was given at the end of each Sunday Mass and a challenge to live more simply presented to parishioners. The extent to which this was embraced came through in the survey filled in at the end of the year, which has now been submitted to CAFOD as part of our bid to become a 'Live Simply' parish.

The St Edmund's conference of the Society of St Vincent de Paul * (see report below) has continued to make hundreds of individual visits this year to the elderly and housebound and to provide transport for parishioners who would otherwise be unable to attend Mass. The group meets fortnightly and is central to our parish's commitment to pastoral care. During the year ending 31 March, SVP members made 564 visits, provided 54 lifts and gave 782 hours of their time. Three of the elderly people we visit sadly died this summer, and we arranged Masses for them and also attended their funerals.

In addition, it provided practical help to 21 people with clothing, furniture food & transport costs. Contributions were also made to our twinned SVP Conference in South Sudan and the Children's Holiday Fund run by the SVP nationally, as well as towards a replacement van for SVP use in Birmingham. Financial help was given to asylum seekers.

A new member joined this year who has taken on the job of Treasurer, bringing membership to a total of sixteen. This is the largest of the SVP groups in our district. The conference was asked to take on more visitees, particularly by The Knowl, the local hostel for people with mental health problems or recovering from drug addiction, which it has done. It is now at full capacity and needs more members, though will always respond to urgent requests for help.

Other movements, such as the Catenians, Pax Christi and the Justice and Peace group all show the variety of ways in which the faith is actively expressed by parishioners.

The monthly parish lunch offers fellowship and good food, not only for the elderly but for any parishioner who wishes to attend. Parishioners and pupils and staff from OLA are involved in a very practical way, using their skills to help others by preparing and serving delicious food. Meanwhile the Babies and Toddlers group continues to be a great support to parents with small children, both to parishioners and those from the wider Abingdon community.

Our Wednesday 'Cake and Conversation'* (see below for annual report) sessions are greatly valued across Abingdon, offering support, among others, to the town's au pairs, who can often feel lonely and far from home. Its 10th Birthday was recently celebrated as part of the International Evening, which is organised every year for the Parish to celebrate its cultural diversity. The drop-in sessions are open to anyone whose first language is not English and, increasingly, we have welcomed newcomers to Abingdon and the area who have no connection with our parish. 'Cake and Conversation' has always seen itself as part of the outreach of St Edmund's to the local community and, over the years, hundreds of guests have been welcomed from around 30 different nationalities. Our thanks go to the regular group of 6-8 volunteers, who provide the warm welcome and a listening ear.

For once, the weather smiled on our parish day, a wonderful occasion for the whole parish to come together in our beautiful grounds. The parish continues to invest a great deal of energy in welcoming new members of our community, both before Mass and at coffee after the 10.15 celebration. St Edmund's remains a very diverse community, with large numbers of international parishioners enriching parish life. Catholic life in our country is kept vibrant by those who come to us from overseas and we are blessed by the presence of the many different nationalities that make up the body of Christ.

We also continue to share faith and fellowship with other Christians in Abingdon through the CiA group* (see below for short report), recognising that we share one baptism and one faith in Jesus Christ. In the past year CiA, including St Edmund's, has given grants to a number of charities and St Edmund's has been a major contributor to the quarterly publication Christian Focus. The Maundy Thursday shoe-cleaning event was led by members of the parish. Parishioners took part in other CiA activities, including Christian Unity Week,

Good Friday events, the Women's World Day of Prayer, the Annual Bereavement Service and Alpha events.

The Church really is the only body that accompanies the individual, in fellowship, from the cradle to the grave. Every week we see representatives of all age groups coming together as a family at St Edmund's to express our common faith and draw strength from the sacraments. This is truly something to celebrate, especially in a world which, as St John-Paul says, is too often broken and dehumanised. It is good to be able to report once again how vibrantly our parish fulfils its mission to bring people together as we make our journey.

I would like to end by thanking Fr Jamie for his devoted service to St Edmund's over the last year and for the love and care he has shown our parish, especially at a time when Bishop Philip makes so many demands on him. We had the joy this year and celebrating a significant birthday with him and I hope we will have the opportunity of celebrating many more.

SVP REPORT

During the year ending 31 March 2017, SVP members made 564 visits, provided 54 lifts and gave 782 hours of their time to the activities of the SVP. In addition we individually or jointly provided practical help to 21 people with clothing, furniture food & transport costs. We also contributed to our twinned SVP Conference in South Sudan, gave financial help to asylum seekers, contributed towards the Children's Holiday Fund run by the SVP nationally and also towards a replacement van for SVP use in Birmingham.

We were joined by a new member this year who has taken on the job of Treasurer, bringing us to a total of sixteen. This is the largest of the SVP groups in our district (which is based on Oxford). We have continued to meet fortnightly, apart from during August. Three of the elderly people we visit sadly died this summer, and we arranged Masses for them and also attended their funerals. However, we were asked to take on more visitees, particularly by The Knowl, the local hostel for people with mental health problems or recovering from drug addiction, which we have done. We are now at full capacity and need more members, though we always respond to urgent requests for help.

CIA REPORT

In the past year CiA, including St Edmund's, has given grants to the following: Abingdon Bridge, 35 Ock Street, Back to 35, Abingdon Street Pastors, Desire- (School Events, Prayer Spaces and Experience Easter).The Maundy Thursday shoe-cleaning in the market Place was led by members of St Edmund's, and various parishioners took part in other CiA activities - Christian Aid week (house collections and a stall in the Market Place), Christian Unity Week, Good Friday events, Women's World Day of Prayer, Annual Bereavement Service, pre-election hustings and Alpha events.

St Edmund's has been a major contributor to the quarterly publication Christian Focus, having at least two articles in each edition.

CAKE AND CONVERSATION REPORT

As Cake and Conversation goes into its 11th year in the parish, we celebrated its 10th Birthday last Sunday evening in the Parish Centre as part of the International Evening which Cake and Conversation organises every year for the Parish to celebrate our cultural diversity.

The Birthday cake, beautifully made by Sylvia Nelson, was cut by Eva Grus-Dowczynska, who was one of those at the first small Cake and Conversation session 10 years ago. The drop-in weekly sessions are open to anyone whose first language is not English. Cake and Conversation has always met from 9.30-11am each Wednesday morning and, increasingly, we have welcomed newcomers to Abingdon and the area who have no connection with our parish. We just `welcome the stranger`. Some people come every week, some come when they can but all find a warm, friendly welcome and a chance to practise their English. Cake and Conversation has always seen itself as part of the outreach of St Edmunds to the local community and, over the years, we have welcomed hundreds of guests from approximately 30 different nationalities.

At the 10th birthday party last Sunday, besides displays of photos over the years – Christmas celebrations, walks round Abingdon, forging friendship over cake from different countries – there were messages of appreciation from `old` Cake and Conversation regulars from as far afield as Japan.

The 10 years of Cake and Conversation has always depended on a regular group of 6-8 volunteers from the parish who provide the warm welcome and a listening ear. It is thanks to them that Cake and Conversation continues.