

## **Vicar's Report for the APCM | 26<sup>th</sup> April 2026**

*Presented during the "sermon slot".*

After our service today, we will hold our two annual meetings. In a way these two meetings deal with a lot of what could be considered "business items": the election of office holders; the presentation of the accounts; and reports on other important items such as Safeguarding.

Most of these are statutory requirements, not just set out for us by the Church of England, but indeed by the government. Many people do not realise that every parish church is a registered charity in its own right. PCC members are trustees with legal responsibilities and duties under laws set out by the Charity Commission. And so, for that reason alone these two meetings are important.

But for us as a church, beyond our legal status and responsibilities - for us as a church as the local expression of the "People of God" here in this parish, these meetings are also important in another way. That is because they give us an opportunity to come together to look back and reflect, as well as then to look forward, to think about vision, about mission, perhaps even to dream about what may lie ahead, and to what God may be calling us to do very specifically here in this community.

As we look back there is a lot to be grateful for, and we will think about that in a few moments time. But I think it is important to acknowledge that there were a few difficult months in 2025 as well. Some people who had been part of this community for years felt it was time to move on, and underlying that there was a sense of hurt and disappointment for all involved. And that includes me, I have found things hard at times. I think it is only right to acknowledge that: there was hurt and disappointment – and that is always something to lament.

But as I said, there is lots to be grateful for. Let me start with exactly those things I mentioned earlier, those things we consider "business" or perhaps "material", but that are actually so important for us as a church to function, and to then engage in mission.

The first are three major areas of any church. Finance, Safeguarding and Administration. I will start with the latter. I know I am speaking on behalf of all the PCC when I say how fortunate we are to have Sophia as our Parish Administrator. Much of what she does is unseen, but it is all so very important. So, on behalf of

the PCC but with a personal note of gratitude for the good working relationship: thank you Sophia for all you do, not just as our parish administrator, but also as PCC secretary.

Secondly: Safeguarding. Although we made very good progress with our Safeguarding policies, procedures, DBS checks and training in 2024, the fact that I was interim Parish Safeguarding Officer (PSO) was not an appropriate long-term arrangement. It was therefore a real blessing when after some conversations I had with Frances, she agreed to take on this important role at the end of 2025. Thank you Frances for your commitment and your enthusiasm. I know with your professional experience and your insight, we are in safe hands and that is so important to know.

And finally, Finance. Please know that I am not exaggerating when I say that David has transformed our finances. David retired last year, but he has found himself almost as busy bringing the church accounts up-to-date, and allowing the PCC to better understand its financial position. When David presents the accounts later, I think you will all see for yourselves why I am so grateful, and indeed why the PCC is so grateful to David.

David: the fact that our financial position has improved during 2025, is not just because of the generosity of our congregation and the good management of church resources, such as the hall, but also because of your diligence, commitment and careful management – thank you!

Those are three major areas where we can give thanks, but as I said there is **a lot** to be thankful for, and **a lot of people** to thank.

Like it or loathe it, social media is now a major part of our lives. I am very grateful to Meg for managing our church social media accounts so well. I know that behind all the pretty pictures and posts, there is first and foremost a vision that Meg developed, which was about welcome and engaging people within our community, many of whom may not otherwise engage with the church. And it has worked, it has led to baptism enquiries, wedding enquiries and when I speak to people in the community, they know about what we are doing at St John's because they have seen it on either Facebook or Instagram. So, thank you Meg for all your hard work on that.

And related, our website. I am grateful to Simon for his continued IT support to St John's, despite him living in Stafford.

Tea. I said before there were three major areas to any church, I was wrong. There are of course four major areas, and the fourth is tea. And by my conservative calculations, taking into account the pre-service rounds of tea served by Jill behind the scenes, the Wednesday morning tea served by Barbara, and of course our Sunday morning cups of tea, we are looking at around 2200 cups of tea (and coffee) served during 2025.

So, thank you to all who serve and provide our refreshments - tea, coffee, biscuits, homemade cake. But I think a particular thank you is in order to Debbie and Eira for serving our main refreshments diligently every Sunday. Often one of the first here to prepare, and certainly the last to leave!

But it wasn't just coffee, tea and cake we enjoyed together. We are very blessed to have Bill, who not only cooks very delicious food, but who also manages to then serve this for up to 20-30 people, without seemingly breaking a sweat! Thank you Bill - and also Tomasz, and all those who from time-to-time complement Bill's offerings with vegetarian options, or indeed desserts!

At the heart of what we do as a church, is of course our worship. And it is worship that we offer together. So, in many ways a big thank you to all of you for faithfully gathering here to worship God and to bear witness. For those who take particular roles in our worship, thank you. Thank you to those who welcome people, those who read and lead intercessions, and those who administer chalices.

A special thank you to our altar servers: Bill, Meg and David - collegially known as "the purveyors smells and bells". And thank you for the joy that you do it with, and your commitment to being here pretty much every Sunday, as well as for special services. And again, you are often some of the first here, as well as the last to leave on a Sunday.

Our worship is enriched as well by our musicians. Richard on piano and Dan on the organ – thank you both for what you bring to our services. We also had the Brass Foundry lead our worship for Remembrance Sunday and for Carols by Candlelight, filling this space with glorious sounds.

As we think about our worship and give thanks, a reminder of some of the special services we had in 2025. There were of course special services for Holy Week, Easter and Christmas, as well as other major festivals. We welcomed several guest preachers for some of our special services, including Bishop Stephen

Venner for our patronal, and Bishop Rob Wickham, CEO of the Church Urban Fund for Christ the King. We welcomed the choir, clergy and members of the congregation from St Saviour's in St Albans for a Choral Mass on Ascension Day. In June we invited Lucy Martin from the Watford Women's Centre to speak for a special Mary Magdalene Sunday.

Our regular midweek services continue to be well attended, and these provide opportunities for regular prayer for the church, the world and the parish, outside of the Sunday services. In February a new service of Exposition and Benediction was introduced on the 2nd Thursday evening of the month. Rosary prayers were also said on a monthly basis until August.

Throughout the year we baptized several children, and we hosted a Deanery Confirmation service in October, where 2 young people were baptised and 7 were confirmed.

Faith & a Pint, which meets monthly in a local pub for an informal discussion about a topic of faith or community life, continued to grow. People from several other local churches regularly attend and enrich the meetings. A big thank you to Claire and Meg for their leadership of this group.

We applied for a community grant to install a defibrillator for use by the community. In May the church was used as a polling station, and in June we hosted a three-day beer festival. These things, in addition to the church being used by local councillors for activities such as litter-picking and community meetings, contributed to the church being more visible within the community. A big thank you to Clive for his bridge building work between the church, the local councillors and the community.

Another way we became more visible was through our collaboration with Ilario Ferrari on a Jazz concert series called "Conversations in Jazz". This has brought both local and international Jazz performers to St John's. We kept ticket prices affordable and allowed children to attend for free, thus giving all those within our community access to beautiful music. Many people who came along commented on the beauty of the church, and how they felt welcomed in to the space.

And there were other ways that we have become more visible and more outward looking as a church during 2025. I have made links with various interfaith groups

and other churches, not least St Mary's, and it has been great to see several members of both our congregations engage across our "parish boundaries".

As Chaplain, I have enjoyed leading worship in the school, as well as getting to know staff and children and supporting them either practically in class, or through one-to-one chaplaincy. I am very grateful for the commitment of headteacher Anna to the link between our church and the school. It has meant that there are weekly opportunities to share the good news of God's love with over 400 pupils and their teachers, parents and carers, in the school, as well as in the church during special so-called "retreat days". I also worked with the Diocese to deliver a new program for the year 6 pupils called "The Alban Way" looking at spiritual practices and how to build resilience.

There is so much to be thankful for, and a lot of people -you all- to thank. I of course am grateful to our PCC members, giving up their time and contributing their skills. Those who served a whole year: Clive, David, Jenny, Jill, Meg and Robert, as well as those who resigned from PCC early: Alex and Tom. Thank you all.

There is one person in particular who I want to thank as I come to the end of this report. And that is Jill. For the last part of 2025 and up until now, Jill has served as our only Churchwarden. I have one frustration with Jill and that is that she consistently underestimates herself, and what she means to those around her.

Jill: you have an incredible gift of supporting anyone and everyone, no one is excluded and no one is ever judged. You make people feel heard, listened to and welcomed. You show care and compassion to all, including me and you really have been a support to me personally.

A Churchwarden -as the Archdeacon reminds us of every year- is crucial to the welcome that a church provides, to new people but also to those who come every week. This is you full stop: you welcome people, everyone equally. I am so grateful that you have agreed to serve for another year as Churchwarden – thank you Jill. And I am really pleased that Jenny has agreed to join Jill as Churchwarden – thank you Jenny!

So, as we reflect on the year that has been, as we give thanks for the things we have achieved and for the people who have made it happen, I want to end this report by looking ahead. We are a third way into 2026 now, and we have a lot to look forward to still. Over the next few weeks several people will be baptised,

there are weddings planned, we have a special 4-hour “Conversations in Jazz” happening in May in collaboration with Watford Jazz Junction. The beer festival will return and this year we are planning a community fun day as part of that, working with the mayor and our local councillors. In July Lesley will join us as our curate, and I for one am very much looking forward to working with Lesley and what she will bring to our community, as well as what we together can bring to her as she prepares to be priested in 2027, and ministry beyond that. And there will be other exciting things no doubt, opportunities for outreach and for service within the community.

But at the heart of all of that, we will always first and foremost be a worshipping community. That is what we are rooted in: the worship of the living Triune God. As I said last week, as we reflected on the Emmaus story: we first and foremost are called to open the Scriptures and to break bread. And as we commit to that for the year ahead, we can be confident that God will continue to open our eyes to see him working amongst us, and to help us see where we can be working with him to build St John’s together as a church rooted in this parish: to the glory of God and for the good of our community.

***Fr Corniel, April 2026***