

Ss Alban and Stephen Parish Assembly 2021

Reports from Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Strategy Groups

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Parish Assembly 2021- PPC Report

The last 4 years in the life of our parish have been particularly eventful: we have suffered the loss of much loved priests and the subsequent departure of the MSC community after 120 years of service; we have warmly welcomed our wonderful new diocesan priests; said a fond farewell to our Parish Youth Coordinator; and at the time of writing we are emerging from a debilitating viral pandemic that has shaken the world and caused the sad loss of a number of parishioners. Throughout these tumultuous times, the catholic community at St Alban & St Stephen carry on in the faith and love of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Parish Assembly held in June 2017 agreed that the existing priority groups: Liturgy, Mission, Parish Friends, Youth and Justice & Peace, should continue their work, and that communication, support for young adults, and leadership of the laity were important topics to address in the coming years. The parish strategy groups have continued to focus on what they do well, and each has produced its own report summarising the group's activities over the last 4 years. The entire parish thanks the members of each group for the work they do and the many hours they give in helping us to deepen our faith and to put it into action in our community. We are indebted to our priests, and to the Liturgy group, musicians and our parish web administrators in particular for ensuring that we have been able to continue worship throughout the liturgical calendar, both in normal times, and more recently when we have sometimes relied on streamed services.

The PPC exists to support and advise the parish priest in building our community of faith and in representing the views of parishioners. It has met almost every month, since July 2017 with the meetings continuing via Zoom during the pandemic lockdown, and a report of each meeting has been published. Members of the PPC belong to one or more of the parish strategy groups, and they have also given more of their time in leading or contributing to a number of additional PPC-led activities over the last 4 years, when an additional year of service was required. The appointment of our very able parish caretaker has made a huge impact on the maintenance of the church buildings.

Following a review of ways to improve communication in the parish in 2018, the parish website was redesigned to modernise its look and feel, and to simplify finding parish information. An electronic noticeboard, displaying parish news items on a loop was mounted in the parish centre. Rotas of volunteers ensured that both the website and the eNoticeboard were kept up to date. The bulletin was made available electronically as well as in hard copy and the parish Facebook group continues to be used regularly by its loyal group of parishioners. Since the Covid-19 pandemic forced the closure of all churches nationally in March 2020, live streaming of mass from our church was enabled in May 2020 using a Zoom – YouTube temporary arrangement, before the more permanent cameras could be installed in September. Welcome posters have recently brightened the external front wall of the church although an external parish noticeboard remains a future development.

A social committee organised a lovely parish summer garden party in July 2018, but a further parish party organised for September 2020, had to be put on hold. Get-togethers to welcome new parishioners continued throughout each year up to 2020 and Christmas Day lunches have been organised every year, although as a takeaway during the Christmas in 2020.

The Youth Team has continued to support the children's liturgy and priests, lay catechists and parents in the preparation of children and young people to receive the sacraments of Reconciliation, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. It is recognised that the appointment of a Youth Coordinator is a key priority for the parish.

A meeting on the future of our parish held in November 2017 and follow up discussions highlighted the desire for more support for personal prayer and faith formation. A member of the PPC published a parish prayer leaflet and the Mission team's report highlights the diverse range of opportunities provided for adult formation over their 4 year plan. It has been wonderful to welcome additional volunteers into existing ministries in the parish as a result of the 'Sharing your Talents' campaign and more recently in the calls for stewards to join the rota to enable our church to open again safely for public services following the pandemic lockdown.

Our involvement in Churches Together in St Albans, Churches Together in Marshalswick and City Centre Churches has led to participation in a number of ecumenical events during the last 4 years, with members of the PPC organising the Good Friday Cross Procession and the annual Autumn Prayer Walk and our participation for the first time as a parish group in the annual St Alban's day pilgrimage. A number of parishioners joined other local churches for Lent talks and reflections and Youth Team members have organised ecumenical events for children. Our first pet's blessing service was held in Autumn 2019.

The parish has provided financial support to a number of local and overseas charities, and individual parishioners volunteer with local organisations that support the homeless and otherwise disadvantaged members of our community. The Justice and Peace team has ensured that our parish has joined in local and national events focused on protecting our environment and supporting people living in difficult situations in developing countries.

The annual Sunday mass counts were relatively stable at around 1100 people each year from 2016 to 2019. The church was closed for much of 2020 and the early part of 2021, and the Marshalswick Mass Centre remains closed at the time of writing. However, it is encouraging to see attendance at Sunday masses growing gradually. We pray that this will continue and we once again see our entire parish community coming again to church.

Finally, the PPC is grateful to Fr Michael and Fr Julian for their vision in leading our parish and for their spiritual guidance and good humour during their first 18 months with us during what has turned out to be an extraordinary time.

Parish Mission Group 3-year Plan

Mission Group	2017	2018		2019		2020		2021
	Jul-Dec	Jan-Jun	Jul-Dec	Jan-Jun	Jul-Dec	Jan- Jun *	Jul-Dec	Jan-Jun
Advent Talks	Nativity Today Homeless; marginalised; refugees; Joy of Christmas		CTSA (Fr Alan Talk at Marlborough Road Methodist Church)		Advent Talks on Mary by Brian Purfield – link to Rededication of England		Fr Michael & Fr Julian Advent Lectures	Feedback sessions on Fr Michael's Advent Talks and Parish Assembly
Lenten Talks		Eucharist Talk (March); Brian Purfield: <i>Biblical Journey through the Mass</i> (May/June)		CaFE 'The Joy of Hope; 'Rejoice and be glad' to accompany small group booklet*		<i>City Centre Churches Lenten collaboration</i>		
Pentecost Talks								
Other Events			Mission Sunday Prayer Bookmarks; Remembrance Sunday Bookmarks	Friends of the Holy Land Talk	<i>Rededication of the Nation's Faith Talk Sr Camila</i>	<i>Pilgrimage to Westminster Cathedral; Statue of Our Lady</i>	List of on-line Resources produced	Sunday Zoom Coffee Sessions; Mauro & Janet Iannicelli Come & See Catholic Evangelisation Ministries <i>Bible Timeline</i>
Finding Silence	Worth Abbey (October)	Worth Abbey (April)		Worth Abbey (May)		<i>Worth Abbey Spring Retreat 27th-30th April</i>		
Finding Silence days		Bishop John Crowley (Jan)	Finding Silence Weekend Walsingham 19-21 st October	Film 'In Pursuit of Silence'	Finding Silence Weekend Walsingham			
Sharing the Light	November 16 th		November 22 nd	March 27 th				
Card distribution	Christmas Card (December)	Easter Card (April)	Christmas Card (December)	<i>Proclaim Prayer Card</i> distribution	Easter Card Christmas Card (April/December)			
Pilgrimages / Prayer Walks	Julian of Norwich (July)	Northern Saints II: York (June)	Diocesan Holy Land Pilgrimage (November)	City of London Churches Pilgrimage June 20				Friends of the Holy Land Pentecost Challenge Virtual Pilgrimage
Cross Procession		Good Friday Procession		Good Friday Procession		<i>Good Friday Procession</i>		
Catholic Bible Sunday	December 10 th							
Small Groups	<i>Advent diocesan faith sharing program Pre-Advent</i>	<i>Lent diocesan faith sharing program Pre-Lent</i>	<i>Advent diocesan faith sharing program Pre-Advent</i>	<i>Lent diocesan faith sharing program* Pre-Lent</i>	<i>Advent diocesan faith sharing program Pre-Lent</i>	<i>Advent diocesan faith sharing program Pre-Advent 'A Word for Lent'</i>	Catholic Bible School: Matthew's Gospel (moved to on-line)	Friends of the Holy Land and Diocesan Lenten Booklet
CTSA	Autumn Prayer Walk (September)	Christian Unity Week 'Thy Kingdom Come'; St Alban Pilgrimage (June)	Autumn Prayer Walk	St Alban Pilgrimage	Autumn Prayer Walk	<i>St Alban Pilgrimage</i>		
Centre33	Sleep out (December)		Sleep out (December)		Sleep out (December)			
ALPHA			ALPHA Course – October / November/December	ALPHA Course – January (conclusion) and follow-on		<i>Possible ALPHA course</i>		<i>On-line training ALPHA</i>
CaFE	<i>Beloved Disciples</i> (Oct – Nov)	<i>Let it Be</i> (March) <i>The Saints</i> (June - July)		CaFE 'The Joy of Hope' DVD Series		<i>CaFE Global Healing DVD Series Sat March 7th + Sun. March 29th</i>		CaFE <i>The Big Picture</i> ; CaFE <i>Strength to Strength</i> Zoom Programmes; <i>Belong and Believe</i> Review
RISE Theatre	Oscar Romero Drama (October)							
PROCLAIM	Workshop (September)	Workshop (May)		Spring Meeting Sherry Weddell (June)	Tim Stevens: <i>Sharing Faith with Friends and Family</i> Evangelisation Talk		Supporting Faith in the Home Diocesan Zoom meeting	

*Highlighted Jan- Jun activities were planned but interrupted by lockdown

Parish Friends Report

Pre-Lockdown: The Parish Friends Group started in the parish in 2008.

Lifts to weekend masses were arranged on a rota basis for vulnerable parishioners and we visited or phoned vulnerable parishioners regularly.

We organised 3 or 4 Tea Parties each year, including a St Patricks Day Party. We also arranged a Turkey and Tinsel New Year Lunch each year and a variety of Film Shows to cater for all ages, that were always considered hugely successful. Lifts were arranged to all these events.

Every Tuesday afternoon we held Knit and Natter meetings which were very well attended. The group provided jumpers for children in an orphanage in Africa; hats for new born babies; forget-me- knots for the Alzheimer Association during dementia week and scarves for homeless people in winter.

We organised outings for parishioners – either a day trip to the coast, or a river trip with a ‘cream tea’ whilst onboard.

We continued to support the Neighbourhood Links scheme until its demise – after which we took on the task of contacting newly registered parishioners to provide an additional welcome to the Parish. We often helped and organised coffee in the foyer of the parish centre after particular ‘special’ Masses.

Over the past 3 to 4 years the ‘You can be Santa’ scheme (YCBS) has continued to grow and flourish. With the ongoing very generous response of our parishioners and the hard work of our volunteers, we have been able to support a large number of children and families from within the Parish, plus those being supported by the Life houses, a particular school in London, the St. Albans Refuge, Homestart, the Catholic Workers Farm and the Intensive Family Support team. We have worked closely with the SVP. We have provided gifts or vouchers for the children at Christmas and eggs or vouchers at Easter. In addition, we have supported a number of adults with learning disabilities at Christmas time.

During Lockdown: We arranged that all the parishioners we knew of, who did not have internet access (approx. 50 in total): had a copy of the Parish Bulletin and the Sunday Readings delivered to them each week, by hand. Fifteen volunteers have continued to do this over the last 14 months and have befriended those they deliver to. Friendships have developed and support has been given by the volunteers.

Together with Fr Julian, we initiated daily praying of the rosary during the first Coronavirus lockdown period. We participated in the Stations of the Cross during Lent. Unfortunately, we have been unable to offer lifts to mass, or have any social events during the lockdown, but we have tried to ensure that all vulnerable parishioners have had a phone call at least once a week. YCBS presents and Easter Eggs to the less fortunate, were replaced by vouchers and the YCBS team organised a group of volunteers to deliver the vouchers. The 2020 Christmas scheme saw us helping 154 children.

The ‘Knit and Natter Group’ has flourished throughout the lockdown, with several parishioners and non-parishioners kept busy knitting scarves, hats and squares for blankets. The squares have been croqueted together to make blankets that have then been delivered to all our parishioners in Care Homes and also to the refugees and migrants at the new Catholic Workers Farm in London.

Post Lockdown:

- To restart providing lifts where needed to Mass and social events
- To continue to provide friendship and support to as many people in the parish as possible
- To provide telephone support and visits for those in the parish who are housebound for whatever reason.
- To continue with our social events which enable senior parishioners to meet up, catch up and have fun.
- To continue with the YCBS and Easter egg schemes
- To continue with the Knit and Natter Group
- To recruit more volunteers to take part in the planning and delivery of all our events/services
- It would be great to have more young people involved in helping and organising our tea parties and films.

Parish Justice and Peace Group Report

The world is awash with people whose lives are blighted by a lack of basic things – peace, security, work, land, shelter, food, water, health, clothing, education, respect, poverty, love, self-worth. There are countless others facing the terrors of war, violence, abuse, intimidation, hatred, slavery. These people – ordinary children, women and men – exist in every country, city, town and village – including the UK and St Albans. Too many of them are invisible. Our home, planet Earth, is suffering its own torments caused by greed, neglect, waste, lack of care. And all this overshadowed worldwide by the Coronavirus pandemic. The task facing us is enormous. It would be easier to look the other way and yet Jesus's invitation to serve is always on our minds and in our hearts.

As Justice & Peace (& the Integrity of Creation) we meet to pray, to discuss our concerns for the world around us, to encourage each other and to decide collectively on initiatives and actions, inspired by the Gospel and motivated by Catholic Social Teaching. We are greatly encouraged by the Pope's Encyclical "Laudato Si".

We are very interested in the possibility of our Parish working towards the Livesimply Parish award organised by CAFOD to enable all of us as parishioners to live more sustainably and tread more lightly on this Earth.

For the past few years we have participated in St Albans Sustainability Festival, previously with a bread-making workshop and this year with a self-guided walk on the theme of Live Simply from our church to St John Fisher School, host to Marshalswick Mass Centre. We were thrilled that the pupils of St John Fisher helped by contributing posters on the theme of Live Simply to be displayed along the route.

Twice a year we hold a day of reflection on the link between the Gospel and action for justice, these have included workshops on climate change and non-violent communication.

Along with other Parish groups, we have contributed to the Parish Lenten Stations of the Cross. In the past these have included linked prayers to the women of Nablus in Palestine and the Cathedral in Damascus, Syria. This year we chose to follow the Stations of the Cross created by CAFOD.

In August we arrange a short service of remembrance at the Abbey Japanese Peace Obelisk for the victims of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In 2019, in response to J&P in Scotland and our local CND group, we contributed to the making of 1,000 origami cranes (a Japanese symbol of peace) to send to children in Hiroshima.

We have attended rallies on climate change and vigils against the arms trade outside the Ministry of Defence. We have distributed leaflets for Medical Aid for Palestinians. We have attended talks and distributed information on modern day slavery and human trafficking. We have corresponded with our local MP on issues relating to human rights, refugees and climate change.

We are in contact with Pax Christi, Caritas, CAFOD and the Catholic Worker Movement (CWM), including the CWM Farm here in the UK.

We have supported CAFOD appeals and collections, and twice a year, to complement the CAFOD Family Fast Day, we have put on a film with a thoughtful social message and served home-made bread and soup. The feedback we have received has always been very positive.

The Fairtrade stall has been organised by two of our members for over 25 years. They also run coffee mornings for CAFOD, maintain the Parish Fairtrade status and this Lent raised an astonishing £3,600 for CAFOD by walking every day for 40 days. We have helped organise collections of goods for the local food bank, local homeless charities and for refugees and have been overwhelmed by the immense generosity of our parishioners.

Like many of our parishioners, Individual members of our group volunteer in specific local charities such as The Living Room and other local enterprises.

In November this year the UK will host the 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Lasting for two weeks, it would be the largest summit the UK has ever hosted, with up to 200 world leaders expected to attend for the final weekend. It is designed to produce an international response to the climate emergency. Along with CAFOD and using their materials we will campaign for the success of this conference.

If you would like to join us, you will be very welcome.

Parish Liturgy Group report

Before Lockdown, the Group aimed to help ensure that all church services functioned reverently and efficiently. Meetings took place to plan and review events and guidelines, covering Ministers of the Word and the Eucharist, music groups, etc. Different liturgies for special seasons and celebrations: Advent, Christmas, Lent, etc. were coordinated by Group members: music arranged, extraordinary ministers and welcomers appointed, and literature prepared – including the special leaving Mass for the MSCs with order of service with biographies – all appreciated.

During Lockdown, the Group kept in contact using e-mail meetings and surveys to canvass people's views on services, etc. This proved very successful and a great way to keep people engaged and valued as more responded than ever attended physical meetings, and many said they felt free to air their opinions.

An enormous effort went into producing the 2020 Easter Triduum services to make them available online (before live-streaming). Readers and musicians from all genres contributed remotely and the services, strung together expertly, were really inspirational, particularly as people could follow the text available online.

Responding to the Lockdown survey available to all parishioners, a list of resources and a Guide to prayer were published on the Liturgy Group page on the website.

Live streamed services Live streaming, begun via YouTube in May 2020 and via the church's camera in September 2020, has been welcomed, particularly by those unable to physically attend church.

Carols by Candlelight continues to be a highlight of calendar, in particular, 2020 was a magnificent joint effort between our church and Northmoor CoE church with music from both choirs and readings recorded remotely and linked together skilfully; more than 1,400 views on YouTube testify to its popularity.

Christmas 2020 Masses were live streamed only with just readers and musicians in attendance; the cribs under the altar and on public display from the porch received very positive comments.

Stations of the Cross 2021 prepared by different groups each week live-streamed on a Saturday morning with just Readers present. Good Friday services at 10am and 6pm, open to all, eased congestion at the 3pm Passion.

Holy Week Services and Easter Services 2021: Limited numbers could attend, services were abbreviated but very reverent, augmented by musicians from all genres, and many different readers participated. Penitential Service was based on the Way of the Cross. Easter Sunday Masses were at normal times with 11.30 as a quiet Mass. Easter garden commemorating deceased loved ones on bamboo flowers, and empty tomb under the altar proved popular.

Ministers of the Word and of the Eucharist: Ministers of the Word have volunteered to read in church at Sunday Masses during Lockdown and on weekdays when the church is open. **Ministers of the Eucharist** have been unable to fulfil their ministry in church for more than a year, although when regulations permit, could distribute Holy Communion to the housebound, but parishioners in care homes have not been able to receive for over a year. We look forward to the time when Ministers resume distributing the Blessed Sacrament in church and their patience is greatly appreciated. The caveat is that extra training regarding safety will be necessary. **Commissioning and recommissioning of Ministers** had to be postponed but they renewed promises of commitment remotely during live-streamed masses: at Pentecost for Ministers of the Word and at Corpus Christi (Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ) for Ministers of the Eucharist.

Newsletter: Biographies of Saints for Feast days supplied are included when space permits, readings for Mass and CTSA prayer are sent in each week. Sunday Mass readings are delivered to the housebound each week.

Children's Liturgy: The Liturgy Group took the lead in ensuring that each week a Children's liturgy is publicised in the Newsletter and can be viewed on the Liturgy Group page on the parish website.

Future Planning From 23 May, music is being re-introduced at 9.30am, 11.30am and 7pm Masses including some led by Marshalswick musicians. The longer term future and format of music needs careful thought and discussion once the pattern of Masses for the future is finalised and restrictions are lifted.

The challenge remains to encourage the congregation to physically attend church, rather than via the internet, and how attendance might impact on the Mass schedule.

Parish Youth Strategy Team report

Reminder of our mission statement - Our Mission is to provide the young people with space to grow in the care, friendship and love of Jesus, so that they can be active in their community and confident in their faith.

We are a small group of just four to five members. I have been on the committee for about five years; and have been the PPC youth rep for about 3 years.

What follows are all the things we did before Covid. A lot of the activities are on hold, with some happening on zoom. But in a non-Covid world, the below is what we do.

There are many things that we do well such as the running of the courses for the Sacraments of Baptism, First Holy Communion / Reconciliation and Confirmation. We also have very successful children's liturgies at the 9:30am Mass both for the under 6's (Little Lights) and the 6-8's (Awesome Angels). On Monday mornings in term time we run a lively Toddlers group after the 10am Mass.

We have re-union gatherings for the Confirmation groups to try and keep them in touch with each other with a hope that they continue to grow in their faith. Before the pandemic we had 20 of them gather for pizza and drinks. By trying to focus on the post-Confirmation age group, we are looking to build a community of young adults for the future.

We have a Youth Club for largely year six children which was taking place about once a month in the upstairs church hall.

Every two years we take the Confirmation groups to Flame, an event in Wembley Arena for young people from all over the country.

We co-organise an ecumenical event for 7-11 year olds called X:site. Held on Saturday evenings, once a term in St. Luke's Anglican church, it is two hours of fun, games, crafts, messy play, live music, songs and actions, prayer and worship.

In the last summer before Covid, we held a Parish Summer Party which was fun for people of all ages with a focus on families with younger children. This was planned to be an annual event.

We had planned to run the John Paul II awards in the parish. This is similar to the Duke of Edinburgh's award with bronze, silver and gold schemes involving 16-18 year olds volunteering to help in the parish and in the community. When we are able to, with the new team in place, I very much recommend this as soon as is practically possible.