The Parish of Newton Abbot and Ogwell

**Rector’s Report to APCM 2025**.

I’ve made one or 2 general comments in my preamble to the written reports, but with people gathered from all 5 of our worshipping communities, I want to say some thank yous, to pick out some highlights from the last year and to speak a little about the future.

**Firstly, some thank yous.**

Having had elections for our new church wardens, and PCC members, I want to say a huge thank both from me and on your behalf to those who have served as Church warden this year: Sharon, Mike, Douglas, Gwyn, Stella and Lorna. You’ve been at church early, left late and been busy at numerous times in between. Thank you for your hard work and service.

Along with Churchwardens we’ve been blessed with some wonderfully effective PCC officers: Barbara our Secretary, Clare our treasurer (ably assisted by Sue), and Rob our Safeguarding officer and his team. Along with the rest of the PCC, plus Mel in the church office, John with the weekly newsletter and Lynn whose done such a lot of work on our website and our social media pages– I want to say thank you to everyone who has helped the church run smoothly this year.

But of course, there are many others who have served so diligently amongst us: welcomers, cleaners, musicians, gardeners, singers, money bankers, readers, intercessors, home group hosts and leaders, kids workers, pastoral visitors, tech teams, bell-ringers, and those who keep us fed and watered after services and on occasions like this. Others serve in less public ways with flowers or providing lifts or words of encouragement or acts of kindness. We are a body of believers, and we rely on each other. And whilst we don’t do it for thanks… It’s right to acknowledge all the ways people serve and say thank you- and keep going!

I also want to say a huge thank you to Gareth – it’s a joy to serve here alongside you- and to Matthew for his encouragement and support. I also want to thank those who have shared the preaching and presiding with us, especially over Gareth’s sabbatical and after Ben’s departure to his new parishes. So thank you to David and Alan and Alan and Keith and Jon who have led and preached in our services over the last year.

Finally, I want to thank Judy for her care for me, allowing me to serve with all the energy God gives, and I’m sure Gareth would want to pay tribute to Samantha as well.

At this point I want to acknowledge those we have said goodbye to this year. Some like Hilary have moved away, some, like Anna have had to move into nursing homes. And some, like John, Simon, Mary, Janice, Jean and Ken- who died last weekend - have gone on ahead of us into glory. May we also live as faithful servants of Christ, until our own race is run.

**So what about the last year? What’s gone well?**

The report details many of the things that have been accomplished over the last year.

Attendance at all 5 churches has been reasonably stable or has risen. Giving was up and our budget was balanced. We’ve taken on a second Mission partner so given more away. We’ve launched yet another home group, started a women’s Bible study group, enjoyed ‘summer with the shepherd,’ run the Bible Course and 3 exploring faith courses and we have been more active in nursing homes and schools than the years before.

In some of our churches, there are more people taking part as readers and intercessors and welcomers, and we’ve managed, as you’ve seen in the reports, improvements or repairs to all of our buildings- with 2 major schemes in the wings and a third starting to be worked on. We’ve started more regular evensongs and in June, our home-grown curate in waiting will be ordained! You’ll have seen in the press the news that across the country, church attendance is up with Gen Z (18-30s?) being especially drawn to consider the claims of Jesus, and from my observations there have been some early signs of the beginning of a spiritual awakening in our town. If the last year was good, the next year has the potential to be even better.

But it’s also been year with many challenges. We were without Gareth for 3 months and Ben left to take on his first incumbency. And almost exactly 1 year ago, Judy was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The last 12 months then have been hard for Judy especially – but for me too. Both of us would like to thank you for your prayers and support over this time.

But in times of struggle and hardship, we found that the Lord is our ever-present helper in times of trouble, our unfailing strength and shelter and our hope and our joy; and that he not only teaches us more about himself through such times, but he uses those times for his glory. We know that has been the case for us, and our prayer is that you would all know that too, when the storms of life hit.

**So what about the coming year?** It won’t be without its difficulties of course – many of which- fortunately- we don’t yet know about!

But let me mention 3 challenges we face this year:

**Finances**: We have touched on this already and it’s a drum I and the PCC will continue to bang because we continue to rely far too much on the income from our ‘business interests’ like the car park and hall hire, and on the past giving of long-dead Christians. The loss of the nursery will hit us hard this year, and as of early May, regular giving under the Parish Giving Scheme had gone down, not up compared to February!

So can I ask again that we all review our giving and see how we might give a little more each month. If we were able to get to the average minimum giving level suggested by the Church of England, we could do so much more! We’d love to appoint a business and buildings manager, a parish evangelist and a childrens and youth worker but we will struggle to do any of those things until we become a more generous people.

Finances. That’s the first challenge.

**Opportunities**: I mentioned earlier the rise in church going across the country and signs of spiritual change here. But how do we seize the day? How do we reach Gen Z with the gospel or have an impact with the teenagers in our town? And let’s not focus our outreach to just one group: We need to find ways to effectively communicate the good news of Jesus to young families, to the middle aged and elderly? How do we reach those who can’t get to church on a Sunday because of work or family commitments? I’ve got more ideas than I know what to do with… but where is the LORD calling us here and now? That’s the question.

So will you commit yourselves to pray for the PCC as we wrestle with these issues – that we would know God’s leading and see God’s provision. Pray too for your own part in that too. Where might God be calling you to say like Isaiah: “Here I am. I will go. Send me!”?

The last challenge I want to mention… and this ties in with what I’ve just said, is this:

**A lack of prayer**: If there is one thing that concerns me more than anything else about the spiritual health of the parish it is the lack of prayer. Now of course I don’t know what goes on in your homes, or when you are put walking the dog or doing the gardening, and it may be that everyone has a vibrant and deep prayer life. But I doubt that this is the case.

Almost every Christian I have ever met struggles to pray for more than a few brief moments every day. There are occasions when I manage little more than that. But a consistent lack of prayer, especially corporate prayer, is evidence for a number of things:

That our relationships with God are not as good and deep and alive as they could or should be.

That we harbour doubts that God can answer, or that he will act.

Or that we feel we don’t need God to answer- because we can manage very well on our own.

It could be any combination of the above, but whatever the reason, a church that doesn’t pray doesn’t grow and ultimately doesn’t last. We can’t bring someone to faith and new life in Jesus. We can’t break addictions, mend broken marriages, change ungodly habits or do anything of any eternal value without God’s help. And God will only answer our prayers if we seek him, ask him and then rely on him. Day by day. Moment by moment.

So once again, can I encourage you to make prayer a greater priority. Pray more on your own, find a prayer partner or put more time aside to pray with others in your small groups. And make a real effort to come along and pray at our weekly prayer gatherings. Not everyone who comes prays aloud. Some of those who do, pray for no more than a few seconds. The dates are always in the pew sheet or the weekly parish newsletter. How about trying to come once a month to start with? And if the times don’t suit you… then start a new prayer gathering at a different time!

Jesus tells us in Matthew 7 that we have a Heavenly Father *who longs to give good gifts to those who ask him!*  And the Apostle James tells us that *we do not have because we do not ask*! If we long for our churches to grow in strength and number, then we must pray! It will only happen if we do!

None of us know what is around the corner. What move of the Spirit might come, what diagnosis might turn our lives upside down, what need or opportunity may suddenly arise, what global event might shake the nation, or what issues of church politics or finance might throw a spanner into the works. But God already knows what is coming. And God is good, and powerful and able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. So let us pray! And pray big, faith-filled prayers and see what God will do.

And if all that seems too much- perhaps you might start by praying that God would give you- and others- the desire to pray… and see where that leads.

The last year has given us much to thank God for. And we have much to look forward to over the next year. So let us keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfector of our faith, and run the race before us with joy and perseverance, for we know that our race is not in vain and our heavenly reward is waiting.