

Parish of Alston Moor – Vicar’s Report for 2022 (4th May, 2023)

Intro

2022 might be described as the beginning of the ‘new normal’: we are still living with Covid-19 and its consequences, but the last restrictions were lifted early in the year, and church life has resumed a more regular pattern, albeit with more happening online than hitherto.

Covid has had a significant toll on our energy levels: though our church communities are still active and alive, we have scaled back our activities, and in common with churches and voluntary groups across the country, attendances are lower than before the pandemic. That said, we are still in good heart, the church is still a force for good in the community, and exciting things have been happening!

Worship

According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1647, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever”, so worship and prayer is at the heart of our Christian life.

Our revised pattern of (mostly) Sunday services seems to be working well and is well received. Some have suggested that more Eucharistic services at St Augustine’s would be appreciated, while others seem to be happy with the current fortnightly provision – I would be glad to receive more feedback on this – but the Eucharist (Holy Communion) is celebrated in at least one church in the parish every Sunday, and our Prayer & Praise services are brilliantly led by our excellent lay ministers – and allow me the privilege of sitting in the pews far more often than most of my clergy colleagues!

Sunday services in Alston are still livestreamed on Zoom and YouTube, allowing a small but regular number of worshippers to join us from home – some from far afield – and the fifth Sunday services, held primarily online, still draw people from across the parish and beyond. We are intending to improve the quality of the technology soon, to allow our online worshippers to participate more actively in all our Sunday services.

In 2022 we welcomed six new members of the Church family through baptism, and three couples celebrated a marriage in church. We also commended nine people to God at funerals, including our friends Bill Meldon, Joan Walton, Gwenda Wood and Thomas Moore. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

Excitingly, in August we welcomed Bishop Stephen Platten to licence Andy Morsman and Richard Pattison as Readers, alongside Richard Glover, and – a first for our parish – to admit Rueben to Holy Communion. We are delighted too that Lizzie Smith has completed her training as a Worship Leader, and Bar once again has Permission to Officiate. All bring their own distinctive styles and gifts to bear, and enrich our worship.

Choral Evensong in Kirkhaugh, and the variety of special services in Knaresdale, all seem to be working well, as does the mix of services in Lambley and the established pattern in Nenthead. We’re very grateful to Madeleine, assisted by James, for keeping that pattern going following the retirement of David after over 30 years’ service as Churchwarden. His leaving party will not be forgotten in a hurry! And thanks to Willow’s generous gift of an electronic organ – and his extraordinary talent as an organist – the music in Nenthead has never been better.

This is a good point to acknowledge the debt we owe to all our Churchwardens. There will be a number of changes this year, as several people step down, but I’m immensely grateful for all they do, whether for a short spell or a very long time indeed! And our love and best wishes go to Liz Walton, a long-standing Warden in Alston, who has now moved away to Hethersgill.

Congregations in small country churches are always precarious – one or two families arriving or leaving can have a dramatic impact on numbers, but with the exception of Garrigill (where there are currently no regular services) our congregations are holding their own.

We make some provision for children: all age services in Lambley, special services in Knaresdale, our fifth Sunday online services, the crib service and in 2022 the Easter Eve Eggsperience, and we’re delighted to have a young server in Alston now. It would be good to do even more, but that’s as much as we have the capacity for at present.

External events have had a significant impact on our worship in 2022: services of prayer for peace in Ukraine (and the candle burning day and night in St Augustine's); the joyous ecumenical service for the Queen's platinum jubilee, and all too soon after, the service to mourn her death.

Clergy in the Church of England are expected to say Morning and Evening Prayer daily: I do this most days in Alston, and Friday evenings in Nenthead, as well as Friday Night Prayer online. Unlike many of my colleagues, I'm fortunate to be joined regularly by others, in person and online. The routine and discipline can be very helpful to one's spiritual life – do consider joining in!

Church and Community Life

Structures and meetings

Our new, more predictable pattern of meetings seems to be bedding down reasonably well, and we are adjusting to life without DCCS in Garrigill, Lambley, Nenthead or Knaresdale. I'm not sure things are yet working as smoothly as they might, and we might consider some tweaks in the next few months. An open meeting for the Knaresdale congregation was a valuable opportunity to build up our common life, and might be useful to replicate in the other churches; and we perhaps need to develop a maintenance schedule for our buildings, and some oversight of the various building and development projects, to keep them moving.

The PCC, Standing Committee and Leadership Team, and the Pastoral Visiting Team, continue their work behind the scenes – thank you to all involved, your work is invaluable. The Green Team has ceased meeting for the time being: important though our engagement with creation care and climate change is, our capacity is limited. Perhaps the PCC or Standing Committee may pick up this agenda in due course.

Ecumenical

We are fortunate to have such good friends in our Christian brothers and sisters on the Moor, with several people worshipping in more than one congregation, and strong relationships between the clergy. The ecumenical Fraternal group (a gathering of both clergy and lay leaders from the Anglican, Catholic and Methodist churches) has resumed – an immensely useful forum – and we have shared a number of events – the Lent group, the Covenant Service and Harvest Festival, the Summer Gathering at the Nook, the All Souls service. And we hosted several Methodist funerals in 2022.

Community engagement

The Alston Essentials prescription delivery service and the outstanding *Faith in the Moor* magazine are the most visible faces of our engagement with the community. Less visible but also important, the church is represented on the Alston Moor Emergency Response Group and the Alston Moor Area Planning Group. It says a great deal for our standing in the community that we are welcomed without question as partners in these groups.

We continue to have good relationships with the schools of the Alston Moor Federation – we host services for the schools in both Alston and Nenthead churches several times a year, I have begun to take school assemblies again (though less regularly than I would like – entirely my fault!), and we welcomed a class from Nenthead School to the church to learn about christenings.

In Knaresdale, St Jude's Coffee Stop is greatly valued and really helps to draw the community together, and to draw members of the wider community into church life. Sadly the Alston coffee mornings have ceased for the time being – huge thanks to Gill for running them for so many years. If anyone would like to volunteer to pick them up again, there is certainly a need!

Other notable events

- St Jude's ever-popular annual plant sale;
- The Alston Art Group and ALATI exhibitions in St Augustine's, including a presentation of prizes by the High Sheriff of Cumbria;
- Concerts by the Brampton Chamber Choir and Steven Moore on marimba in St Augustine's, and the

- Breakaways Choir at St Jude's;
- The Climate Trees exhibition in St Augustine's in September

Developments in Knarsdale

Progress on the development project has been frustratingly slow, but agreement has been reached in principle with the Knarsdale Estate on a financial settlement which will lift the restrictive covenant on the Old Rectory, and give the church a significant sum of money to put towards the work that needs doing. We're optimistic that the Estate will want to offer further financial help in due course.

The reopening of the Kirkstyle Inn on New Year's Eve was much enjoyed by the community, and we look forward to developing a fruitful relationship between church and pub in due course.

Rekindling St Augustine's

For the last few years progress on reordering St Augustine's has been minimal – we were disheartened by grant applications being repeatedly turned down, and Covid hindered us further. But in 2022, as the probate process for Joan's very generous legacy progressed, we were able to start moving again. Much thought was given to the possibility of purchasing Churchgates Cottage, though we eventually concluded that it wouldn't meet our needs. But we expect start tendering for architects and contractors soon – we're excited by the possibilities!

The Wider Church

Deanery

Within the deanery, with the installation of Martin Naylor in Allendale and Steve Wright in Haltwhistle, we once again have a full complement of clergy – for now! I'm pleased to say that the deanery chapter (gathering of clergy) works well, and relationships are strong and supportive – not true of every chapter!

Martin Naylor and I have continued to 'swap churches' occasionally, helping to build links between our parishes and keep us aware of the wider church.

Bishop's Adviser on the Environment

As the 2030 deadline which the Church of England has set for net carbon zero approaches, my environment role doesn't get any smaller! Regular meetings of the Environment Working Group and the North East Churches Acting Together (NECAT)'s working group, meetings with the Bishop and Diocesan Secretary, Diocesan Synod, the national conference, supporting events elsewhere in the diocese all take time. This is all significant – and I frequently feel rather out of my depth, as well as short of time! – but it's good for me to have a role beyond the parish. That said, it isn't a position which I can fulfil indefinitely, so at some point I will hand over to a successor.

Looking to the Future

I started this report by suggesting that we are experiencing the 'new normal'. But I'm not sure that we have yet come to terms with what that means. For many years church attendance nationally has been decreasing, and our communities are becoming increasingly unchurched and ignorant about faith. The disruption caused by Covid has accelerated the change, and so that we can no longer ignore it.

Over the next few years we are going to have to think and pray about how to re-engage with our communities; how to share the faith which sustains us and offers such hope to the world; how – and if – to use and maintain our church buildings and structures. This time last year we were aiming to develop a new Mission Action Plan. For various reasons that didn't happen; perhaps thinking again will give us an opportunity to think more radically.

Our faith is still real, alive and relevant – but we may need to find new ways to share and express it. The new informal Thursday Holy Communion service at the Chat Room is proving popular, as did the Lent discussion group there: this may give us a clue of what the future might look like.

A unified PCC opens up the way to joint accounts – rather than having separate bank accounts, treasurers and reporting systems for each church, we may be able to combine some or all of them into one – while still retaining separate funds for each church. We're immensely fortunate that Willow to take on the role of Treasurer as we move forward with this.

Our church buildings and churchyards are still loved and valued by the communities in which they sit. The fact that volunteers were willing to clean and decorate Garrigill Church for Christmas, and that Chrissie and Normand devote so much time to caring for St Jude's churchyard, just to give two examples, are proof of that. Can we find ways to tap into that goodwill to ensure that the buildings get regular maintenance and TLC? There is still a possibility of developing Garrigill church as an exhibition centre as well as a place of worship, but that will need community support too. In the longer term, the local communities will need to share the responsibility for the buildings, if they are to remain open.

Most immediately and excitingly, much of our energy in the coming months and years will be dedicated to the reordering of St Augustine's: first, making the building sound and watertight; then improving access, heating and lighting; installing toilets and kitchen; making the space more flexible and usable; improving the churchyard and putting in a few parking spaces; restoring and maybe moving the organ... Joan's legacy will enable us to make the building sound and secure for the next 100 years.

Rekindling St Augustine's is a huge project and needs to be undergirded and surrounded with prayer: the new Monday prayer group has been set up, in part, for this purpose, but I would urge us all to pray regularly for the project – that our vision for the building would be guided by the Holy Spirit and in line with God's purposes; that we would make good decisions; that architects, contractors and subcontractors would work effectively and safely; that unforeseen problems might be avoided; that the funds would be sufficient.

Personal

My cancer treatment is now over, and I believe I now have a clean bill of health in that respect. Unfortunately I am now awaiting an operation to remove my gallbladder – hopefully in the next couple of months. I continue to be thankful for the kindness, support and prayers I've experienced from you all over the past couple of years.

When we first moved here, we said we expected to stay between 8 and 10 years. Having been here now for 8½ years, that sounds like an uncomfortably short time – we love being here! That said, it wouldn't be right for us to stay here forever. Be reassured that we're not in any hurry to leave, but it may be that sometime in the next few years we will need to move to pastures new.

People

As ever, I am immensely grateful to all of you who contribute to the life of our churches – in other words, all of you! The church is the people who make it up! We are thankful for those of you with official roles, of course: the Leadership Team, Churchwardens and sidespeople, organists, bell ringers, magazine editors; the PCC and DCC members, lay vice chairs, secretaries and treasurers; the safeguarding officer, pastoral visitors and prescription deliverers; those who tidy, clean and polish, keep our buildings Covid safe, arrange flowers, tend churchyards; those who prepare All Age worship, read lessons, lead intercessions and serve as web hosts; our new altar boy in Alston; those who fulfil all the other tasks which I may overlook. But also every single one of you who, by your presence, your faithfulness, your prayers enrich the life of the church on Alston Moor.

Thank you all – I'm so glad that God has called me to be your Vicar, and look forward to sharing the coming years with you!

Mark Nash-Williams

3rd May 2023