

## Secretary's report to Amersham Free Church AGM – March 2022

I'm finding it hard to believe that this is actually my 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to church members, and looking back at some of the previous ones we can see substantial changes over the years that have intervened since my first one near the beginning of this century! However nothing back then could have prepared us for the situation imposed on us by the pandemic. Last year's report was very optimistic in saying that 'we look forward to the time not too far off, when life almost as we remember it can resume in some form.' Well it hasn't been quite as quick as we might have hoped, and we are only now really beginning to think that we can move on from a virus which has held us all in its grip for another year. This time round of course, life looks rosier thanks to the dedicated work of scientists and the vaccination programme which has encouraged people to dare to hope that we can put the past two years to the back of our minds and learn to live with a virus which will not disappear completely. The world of Zoom has thankfully receded to a large extent although some churches continue to meet in this way. We have been able to resume most of our activities in person, although unfortunately some have suffered permanently and will not be resurrected.

Sadly, since the last AGM, we have lost 5 members through death. Mrs Grace Patton who had moved away along with her husband Derek to be nearer their son, died after several months of illness. Mrs Peggy Babbington died in May, and many of us will remember celebrating her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday during lockdown while she stood in her doorway, her face wreathed in smiles, listening to a small socially distanced group singing Happy Birthday to her. Mrs Jill Graham who had only recently become a member of AFC, died quite suddenly. Mrs Betty Leakey who had been brought faithfully to church in more recent years moved away and died shortly afterwards. Most recently Mrs Yvonne Dawson died in December but her funeral was not able to be held until February. We were also sad to hear of the death of Mrs Daphne Hadley who, although not a member, had expressed a wish to become a member, and was a much loved and very familiar member of our congregation before she became too housebound to attend worship.

We have also had the joy of welcoming 9 new members. In October we welcomed Mrs Muriel Black, Mr Peter Burdin, Mr Caleb Clarke, Mr Paul Clarke and Mrs Dora Klyhn. Later, in December we celebrated the coming into membership of four more, Mrs Angelika Beardsmore, Mr Leslie Chrol-Frolowicz, Mr Ian Hart, and Mrs Susie Hart and in February, Miss Brenda Liddiard.

Elders' meetings have for the most part been in person. This year two elders retire and are not eligible for re-election Mrs Mary Northen and Mrs Janet Reid have served the full six year term allowed for in our constitution, and in the case of Janet Reid, the four years, plus two additional years plus an extra one year allowed for in the case of exceptional circumstances in her extended term as Church Secretary! Mary has been a much valued communion elder organising the slightly revised system of distribution to minimise risk of infection via communion elements. She has also worked extensively on the garden as part of the Eco church initiative, and will be continuing to do so. I want to thank personally every elder over my period of time as Secretary who has been so supportive. Elders have always been willing to step up and do extra duties as required, but there is always a need for new elders to come forward and fill the gaps left by enforced retirement. Bob Marshall deserves special mention as he has worked tirelessly often quietly behind the scenes not only to ensure that we are all well informed about church finances but that many other things are running smoothly as well. This has been particularly true over the few weeks in January when we have been without an administrator. He has offered to stand for another year in the exceptional circumstances in which we find ourselves, and this offer was gratefully accepted by the November Church meeting and has hopefully been affirmed in the ballot papers at the AGM. He will be extremely difficult to replace when the time comes in a year from now.

I mentioned the administrator. Laura Sawyer handed in her resignation in December. She had been offered a job at Dr Challoner's High School which gave opportunities for furthering her career within the education administration sector. We have so valued her quiet efficiency, and in the short period of time between appointments I for one noticed how much I had now forgotten in terms of things needing to be done! She had set up an efficient online booking system which should make running the bookings slightly less onerous as potential hirers can see at a glance when rooms are free and make enquiries via the website. We have been so grateful to her for continuing with odd bits of outstanding work, after the end of her formal employment, particularly with the bookings, pending the appointment of her successor. We welcomed our new administrator, Mrs Swati Nahal when she attended an elders' meeting at the beginning of her first day of work at the end of January. Laura was also able to spend some time going over some of the detail with her to enable continuity.

As has become my custom I intend to use the sections of the mission statement as a focus for the rest of this report. **'To offer worship to God through our Lord Jesus Christ and to celebrate the gospel sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.'** Services have continued to be in person with restrictions varying according to the guidance at the time. In recent months we have settled into a pattern of keeping the back three rows socially distanced and requiring the wearing of masks and no singing. This has been mostly appreciated by those who are either more vulnerable themselves or who have vulnerable relatives. Further forward the requirement to wear masks was relaxed and then brought in again to some degree. We continued to be allowed to sing though, and the wearing of masks during that process was left to people's personal preference. Rachel Green monitored the concentration of CO2 particles in the air in the sanctuary (which gives an indication of the risk of infection should infected particles be present,) and the level was very similar to that which it would have been had we been outside! This is probably largely due to the high roof of the sanctuary and the fact that windows were opened for ventilation even in the depths of winter. From the point of view of our risk assessment this was a very helpful tool. Throughout all of this, Ian has led us in worship in such an encouraging and helpful way throughout. His plans for a sabbatical involving visiting other churches had to be put on hold as churches were so restricted, but he has just managed to restart them as from the beginning of this year, and we look forward to hearing what he discovers through his regular blog on the AFC website. Erna has continued to coordinate the Life and Faith groups, one of which she also leads, and despite having some health problems earlier on, preaches once a month and leads worship when Ian is away.

It was a joy to welcome Arthur Joseph Winton and his parents, Emily and Andrew who brought him for a service of thanksgiving and blessing. Arthur is the grandson of Janette Roberts and it was so good after a long break from similar services to welcome his extended family to AFC.

Holy Communion has been celebrated in person twice monthly as it had been pre-pandemic, but the evening service, which was also a communion service, has not yet been reinstated. This will be kept under ongoing review by the elders.

One of our organists, Graham Nash, moved away at the beginning of this year and we thank him for his commitment in recent years. We have been lucky to secure the services twice a month of Edward Cross who has taken Graham's space in the rota admirably. In addition we have had further contact from Hilary Davan Wetton who was keen to play for us once a month. Richard Brazier and Matthew Green also play on intervening weeks. We are currently very blessed with good organists to accompany our worship.

**'To make the good news of Jesus Christ known, in Amersham and beyond, through words, actions, lifestyle and pastoral care.'**

Lunchbreak, when it restarted, has operated this year in a slightly reduced way, and with a slight break in December and January as concern grew about the Omicron variant, but that along with Tea at Three and Friday coffee provides a place where people can come from the surrounding community for fellowship. In the case of Lunchbreak there are opportunities to hear the good news of Jesus Christ through some of the sessions in the sanctuary after the meal and many non church-goers take up this chance. The opportunity for fellowship and in some cases informal pastoral care is welcomed. This is particularly true now that Women's Own in its previous form has disbanded. Members of this group meet together at Lunchbreak with the group's leaders, Ann Clark and Valerie Edis.

In terms of services with a wider appeal, the obvious success story is Christingle which although again slightly restricted in terms of numbers last year, attracts families to a service which has a magic all of its own. Children who don't go to church at any other time are drawn by their families to this one and it is a joy to see so many faces listening to the retelling of the story and lit up by candles (the battery variety these days).

COTHA (Churches on the Hill in Amersham) services have continued either on Zoom or face to face as in January at St John's. At the most recent COTHA meeting AFC and St Michael's were sad to hear that the decision had been taken to close St John's for worship as from Easter Day 2022. The nature of the covenant itself is therefore likely to change and this will be the subject of several discussions this coming year. Some members of St John's have been worshipping at AFC for a few months and others will find a spiritual home elsewhere, maybe at one of the other Methodist churches in the circuit, but it was good to see St John's very full at the last service and musicians from AFC and St John's coming together for this last joint service in that church.

The Social Committee worked for many years to provide activities which would enhance the life of the congregation. More recently it seems that the emphasis has shifted and that many of the planned outings and social events were attracting fewer people and many of these folk were not otherwise associated with the church. The attraction of these events however did not extend to encouraging them to join in with worship on a Sunday, nor to become any more involved than simply attending the occasional outing. The work and the risks involved became a big concern to members of this committee, and they have decided that it needs a new way forward. In order to involve more people both in attending and organising, it was felt that regular light lunches at church or social bring and share events either at church or in people's homes, would not only share the load in terms of organisation but might encourage others to attend as the costs could therefore be kept down. This approach will be trialled this year but our thanks go to David Eldridge and his hard working committee for all the effort they have put in to organisation of events.

**'To encourage the growth, both in numbers and spirituality of our own congregation and the use of their gifts in church and community life.'**

The growth in numbers is a difficult target to meet during a pandemic but we have received several new members despite this. We have been so pleased to meet new friends and they bring their own experiences and ideas to bear on our planning and life together. One of the issues facing our church (in common with many others) is the absence of regular children in attendance. Junior Church became impossible to organise despite the very creative efforts of Liz Waumsley and her team, and many Sundays no children would come. Liz stepped down from this role at the end of the year and we are so grateful to her for all the imaginative ideas and energy that she put into this work. We currently have no coordinator for work with younger children but Janet Gray has undertaken leadership of the small group of secondary school aged young people. It was decided to try to put all our efforts into a few 'All Age Worship' services to which children would be actively encouraged to come. These would have a teaching element in them, but would also help the children to see that they are surrounded by a loving church family that is only too keen to help and nurture them with a lighter touch than before. To date

we have held three such services and the most successful of them have involved a great deal of active participation from the children. A small group plans them in advance and works on ways in which to make them appealing to the younger element whilst at the same time not losing the interest of the older ones! Quite a challenge! The aim must be to discern gifts from amongst our congregation and use them to the best advantage in services such as these.

**‘To work and pray for Christian unity, world mission, global justice and peace.’**

We have had speakers in our services this year to enhance our understanding of some of the issues facing our world. Our link missionaries, Sergio and Liz Vilela came and spoke to us before their return to Mozambique of some of the challenges they and their two small children face. Duncan Dyason of Street Kids Direct gave us a clear insight into the issues on the streets of Guatemala City. This charity has been supported by AFC for some years, and this year, his talk coincided with one of their main fund raising events, Radio Christmas, when several members of our church were involved either hosting radio programmes, helping behind the scenes or giving an early morning ‘Thought for the Day’. Each month there is a section of our worship set aside to promote the beneficiary charity of our communion offerings. This is also replicated in Family News. Our Bible Teaching Day led by Terry Hinks focused on environmental issues and our Eco Church group continues to work towards raising awareness of issues relating to care for our planet and the unfair distribution of resources. We pray for all of these issues regularly in morning worship. As a church we support many charities both at home and abroad and many individuals within our church are involved more closely with their own particular favourites.

**‘Recognising our human weakness, we pray for God’s strength to fulfil these aims.’**

If ever there was a time when our human weakness was all too apparent, it has been during these past two years. This pandemic has brought out the best in people but it has also shown us our vulnerability. Our whole way of life has been challenged and shaken in a way that I can’t remember ever having happened before, having been born in the post war era. As I conclude this last report as Church Secretary, I can honestly say that it has been a privilege to serve in this role, and now to see our church emerging not fundamentally changed in nature even though many faithful people from the beginning of my term in office are no longer with us. They have all left their mark in many ways, and this ‘cloud of witnesses’ would I believe be impressed by the resilience shown of so many people determined that Amersham Free Church’s voice will continue to be heard in our community and beyond for many years to come. This truth however is not, and will not be, down to any one individual. In the words of Basil E Bridges’ hymn:-

‘This is the truth we hold  
Source of the joy we share,  
Hope that can make us bold  
Trusting the name we bear  
That Christ has died and Christ is risen  
In Christ shall all be made alive.

May the God who has brought us through good times and bad continue to guide and strengthen us in the years ahead.

Janet Reid

March 2022

First draft