

Thank you and what's next?

At 11.30 am on Sunday September 4th 2016, we entered into our interregnum, having said a final farewell to David and Kathryn at that morning's service. Now some 49 weeks later we are slightly less than 80 hours away from the service of collation, induction and installation to welcome our new vicar Jon Hutchinson – only Oxford Diocese could make it sound so grand!

In between these two significant events in the history of this church, legal responsibility devolved to Rogan and Anne as our two church wardens to keep the good ship HTS Sunningdale afloat.

It has been my privilege to have supported them during this time with specific responsibility to oversee our worship ministry. I'm sure that I would speak for each member of the vacancy team, Roz, Karen, Sam, Jane and more latterly, Carol that they too have felt privileged to lead own particular ministry responsibilities.

We were told that whilst no two interregnums were alike, many churches either lost their way or had to steer through increasingly troubled waters and storms. Bishop Andrew encouraged us to do whatever we could in house. Well for the statisticians amongst you I am delighted to say that during the past 49 weeks we have overseen a total of 107 services (and far too many funeral services) and only had to call on outside speakers for just 6 of those if we ignore the Diocesan grandees like Bishop Andrew, Archdeacon Olivier and Catherine Morris the Parish Development Officer who invited themselves as part of their Diocesan interregnum responsibilities.

Bishop Andrew also told us not to get too discouraged if we lost church family members to other churches; the national average is that 10% of church families change churches during an interregnum. That would mean we were likely to lose 9 or 10 families. Well folks, we lost two families to other churches and have welcomed 4 who have started worshipping with us regularly – not bad, I think.

Also, it is common for service attendance numbers to drop; ours haven't and have actually risen slightly on a like by like basis. Yes, I know that there are lies, damned lies and statistics but my explanation for this increase is that people are attending more frequently than they used to. That is wonderful news.

So on behalf of the vacancy team, I want to go on record and say a great big thank you to each and every one of you for the support that you have not only shown to us as individuals but also to thank you for supporting and helping this church to live by faith, to be known by love and to be the voice of hope in our community.

If you think this is beginning to sound a bit like an acceptance speech at the BAFTAs – then I agree it does! As the saying goes....you ain't heard nothing yet

Our sermon series this year was designed to help us get to know Jesus better and in that process become more like him; I could think of no better way to prepare the way for Jon. Jane spoke about the wedding at Cana and encouraged us to party with Jesus whenever we could; to enjoy our relationship with him; to fully engage in our services, our prayers and our bible reading.

The 30 + people who regularly attended the five week lent course certainly seemed to engage with Jesus at a deeper level than many of them expected; that a fact because many gave testimonies to that effect.

Chris used the example of taking out his old kitchen units in anticipation of his new kitchen being installed and how it became clear that there was a huge amount of preparatory work to be done before the transformation from old to new takes place. In terms of our faith, that is equally true and we have been trying to do just that; we have tried to clear out the detritus ready for the new broom to be swept.

We have also tried to pave the way for Jon in very practical ways; we gave a cheque for £1000 to help offset his heavy expenses incurred in moving; the vicarage garden has been transformed; we have shown him hospitality and made many offers of help since he moved into the vicarage three weeks ago. Believe you me, that is not par for the course, as I saw when my son in law moved into his new vicarage last year.

We knew that we were not always going to get it right but there were times when we did and God truly did start to speak into the lives of some church members; one Sunday 9 individuals were sufficiently brave and confident to put their hand up to say that they had heard God speak to them during one of silences which follow all our talks and sermons.

Some, like Roz, Cindy, Jenny and Carol have stepped outside their comfort zone to either lead or preach at our Lynwood services. We have corporately and individually shown compassion and care towards other members of our church family who have had to deal with hurts in their personal lives.

We are just a few hours away from the start of a new era; what has gone before or whatever the current status might be will change. That is a simple, inevitable fact of life....but just think for a moment....that is exactly the situation we faced one year ago; we are different now to how we were on that first Sunday after David left.

One year ago you had no idea what the vacancy team might or might not do and yet you have not only survived but as many of you have said both privately and publically, you feel more secure in your Christian faith.

I'm not surprised at that because Christianity isn't a religion, it is a relationship with Christ. Our aim over the past year has been to help change our relationship with Christ; for us to become more like Christ. Your testimonies have confirmed that in many instances, we have.

And the good news is that we have done so amidst change and uncertainty - but then why shouldn't we have done so because as Paul says in Hebrews, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. I believe it is the unchanging Christ in changing times which sustained us. And what was true over the past year will certainly be true over the coming months and years of Jon's leadership. But there's one major difference between now and the uncertainty of one year ago.

Then the vacancy team had no clear mandate from the wider church family; we were just expected to keep the ship afloat, but Jon is coming with a very clear mandate. This time last year we completed a very detailed survey, the results of which formed the basis of our Parish Profile. In that Profile we clearly stated our hopes and expectations, not only from his leadership, but also in the how we as a church wanted to grow.

Jon has been appointed knowing that we the church family want him as our church leader to help us in what we have called our 4 priority areas:

- Reinvigorate our children and youth programmes
- Develop our facilities
- Encourage everyone to encounter the living God through heartfelt music and worship
- Draw all people to a new life in Christ through outreach and evangelism

But there was a fifth priority too; one declared by Bishop Andrew in his message to all applicants at the very beginning of the Profile. Let me quote the Bishop's words:

“We are looking for someone who will see discipleship as a first priority and who is deeply missional”

What does that entail? How will these priorities be dealt with? Which has the highest priority? The simple answer is, I don't know, but I do know that we are now in a different place to where we were when those priorities were made a year ago; we have already undergone a degree of change and taken some actions in those areas of concern ourselves.

Add in the priority statement made by Bishop Andrew and it is clear to me that Jon will need time to make his own evaluations; to get to know us as individuals and as a church family; to envision us as he believes God is envisioning him. Change will happen, but it is unlikely to be immediate and may well work out differently to how you may have assumed.

We have put additional building blocks in place to ease the path for Jon; Becky has done an enormous amount of work in the background getting everyone through the DBS checks and trained in safeguarding. The PCC have reviewed how different ministries might either be improved or expanded. You might or might not be surprised to hear that many of those reviews advocated change.

One further building block in place which Jon has been very encouraged by is our persistence over the past year; our persistency in prayer; our persistency in trying to become like Christ; our persistency in trying to unite the Word and the Spirit of God.

From my discussions with Jon I sense that he believes that God wants his people to live in unity but unity doesn't mean uniformity; that God loves diversity. And Sunningdale has a reputation for being diverse! Notwithstanding that diversity unity has grown....

The unity that we have shown each week when we end in the words of the grace; the unity that has resulted in occasional bouts of spontaneous applause in response to talks and sermons; the unity of audible amens being spoken midst sermon;

the unity of welcoming in hospitality; the unity of complete silence at certain times in our services.....the unity of humility in acknowledging that we don't always get things right but when we do the unity that we experience as called members of the body of Christ to meet in fellowship and support each other in love.

As I said earlier, we are at the start of a new era and change is inevitable. St Paul said that the public image of the Christian church should be that of a gentle, gracious community and that is exactly how I hope we will respond to Jon's leadership.

In May, Bishop Stephen the recently appointed Bishop of Oxford, wrote an open letter proclaiming his passion and vision for our Diocese as he started to settle into his new role - he wanted to see a contemplative church, a compassionate church and a courageous church.

He did not specify how that could or should be achieved; that responsibility is devolved to the individual church leaders and church families.

There is a further C which Chris talked about in March which fits in very nicely with Bishop Stephen's 3 Cs – commitment. My hope, my prayer, is that we commit ourselves to support the vision and mission which evolves under Jon's leadership; that we show unity in our diversity in that support and commit above all else to live out the good news of Jesus Christ.

I toyed with how I should end this talk.... perhaps as old blue eyes – that's Frank Sinatra to those unfamiliar with past crooners – would say “And now the end is near, and so I face the final curtain”.....well, not really.....you're not getting rid of me so easily!

But I think, instead I want to end by reading out loud once again our two bible readings. They state, much more eloquently and concisely than I have, where we are at the present and where we need to be in the future:

Colossians 3: 15-17
Matthew 28: 19-20

God bless, and once again, thank you for all your support in the past year.