

## **VICAR'S REPORT FOR THE ANNUAL PAROCIAL CHURCH MEETING 2025**

As many of you will remember I was appointed to focus on the development of life at OPC in three key areas, which are:

1. Discipleship and teaching for all
2. Youth and children's ministry
3. Community outreach and mission.

### **Firstly, let's look at discipleship and teaching for all.**

This time last year I suggested that God was leading us into a season where our ministry as a church would not be primarily about people – whether inside or outside the church – but about God himself. And it is true that unless we pay more than just lip service to the aspiration to have Christ at the centre, unless we work actively to bless God, honour him, seek his face, to make him comfortable, welcome, at home, here in our midst, we will never be a place for everyone. We will never be anything more than a glorified social club.

A key Bible story in this, which I flagged in my report last year, is that of Mary and Martha hosting Jesus. I still firmly believe that rather than allow ourselves to be, like Martha, drawn primarily into the many things of church life, God is calling us to be drawn like Mary, to the one thing that must happen. To sit at his feet, look into his eyes, and pay attention to presence, his words, his life. To attend to him, and organise our whole church life around his presence.

To that end, you may remember, we spent several months last year working through the book of Acts, chapter by chapter. My hope was that we would be inspired once again with a vision of how church life can be conducted in and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We looked recently in our current Sunday series, the **Air We Breathe**, at how Jesus began and framed his whole ministry with some now famous words from Isaiah 61.

And in all the business of church life it is essential that we do not lose sight of the purpose of church. And if what we're doing doesn't facilitate the ministry of Jesus in one way or another, then we need to reevaluate.

And the ministry of Jesus is described in those verses from Isaiah 61. This is the year of the Lord's favour. That's not a calendar year. It is the period of time we call the last days. Which began when Jesus rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and 10 days later poured out His Spirit upon all flesh. Peter, quoting the prophesy of Joel, said in Acts 2:

*"And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams".*

In these last days God has poured out his Spirit on us in order that our ministry as his body should proclaim good news to the poor. He sends us, out into the world, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners. This is an exciting and urgent vision for church life; indeed, it is our purpose. Our reason for existing.

We considered in January this year what it might mean to truly have **Christ at the Centre**. To be a temple, a house of prayer, for **all nations**. And we reflected that God considers us living stones, being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

A strong theme in this series was that of rebuilding. I believe God is rebuilding his church in this place. He is helping us to recover our purpose as a holy dwelling for the manifest presence of God. We looked, over several weeks, at what it might look like to offer sacrifices on the altars of our hearts, our homes, our church and our region. Key in all of this is the idea of consecration. Of setting ourselves apart, and dedicating ourselves, ever more deeply for service in the dwelling of God.

I will not rehash that teaching any further here, except to say that in the year ahead I will continue to place before us the goal of growing in holiness, individually and collectively. And we know that any growth in holiness is not to our credit. It is the result of grace. And his grace is not a reward for good behaviour. It is free and unmerited, undeserved and unearned. All of which is to say: we do not pursue holiness **for** God's love; we pursue it **from** his love. As a loving response to His love.

Alongside our personal sacrifices of repentance, prayer, praise, service, and giving, and our continued offering of worship here on Sundays and throughout the week, one recent development that reflects our desire to grow in holiness is our venture into 24-7 prayer. Our first 24 hours of prayer was a really positive experience for all involved, and it is with great expectation that we approach again the season of between Jesus' Ascension and Pentecost when the first disciples gathered to wait and pray until they received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. We now call this short season **Thy Kingdom Come**, and I warmly invite you to get involved, and pray for another outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

## **Second, let's consider youth and children's ministry.**

We are immensely blessed by the ministry of Mary Pike and her team of Sunday Club leaders who have persevered, often at real cost to themselves, to deliver a children's ministry every week we don't have all age worship. I really want to honour these women and men, and ask again if you would consider joining the team to give support to this vital work.

To give you an idea of the level of importance God places on the discipleship of our children it is worth considering that immediately after the Great Shema – perhaps the greatest declaration of faith in the Old Testament, immediately after the call to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and strength. Moses adds this:

*These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.  
Impress them on your children.  
Talk about them when you sit at home  
and when you walk along the road,  
when you lie down and when you get up.*

What we do to impress God's truth on the hearts of our children here at church and at home, is of huge importance in the Kingdom of God. And if I have ever given the impression with Sunday Club that we are just glad to have the children off our hands so we can all hear the sermon, that is very far from my intention. Teaching the faith to our children is of very great importance to God, and it should be of very great importance to us. And we will continue in the years ahead to prioritise this. Have I mentioned that Sunday Club could use more volunteers?

On the youth side, we are soon going to enter the third and final year of our current contract with Missional Generation – the agency who Maria O'Hagan is directly employed by. Working through MG is more expensive than recruiting and directly managing a youth worker ourselves; however, we do not have anyone with the time or expertise to line manage a youth worker, nor the capacity to manage payroll, continuing professional development, nor mentoring and support among a community of peers. Missional Generation does all of this for us, and it remains a great option for us. And we are delighted with all that Maria has contributed to the life of OPC.

We have seen our youth team grow since Maria arrived, partly because she devises high quality session plans for them to follow, enabling them fit serving on the youth team into their busy lives. And while we have seen only a small uptick in numbers, we must know that where the kingdom of God is concerned, you reap what you sow. And we trust and pray that the fruit will come.

Nonetheless, as a church we are running a budget deficit, and conversations will need to be had about allocating funds after our MG contract expires. We will need to consider the option of (partly) balancing the books by ceasing our investment in the youth of Otley. As trustees we must seriously consider this option.

But, as we have seen, God's word makes it clear that we must pass on our faith to the next generation. I believe God is calling us to commit to them, so that whether in good times and in bad, we prioritise reaching children and young people with the Good News that God loves them passionately. But this is going to require sacrificial giving.

I'm not thinking of the roof fund, and want to acknowledge and celebrate the generous one-off gifts we have received for that. If that's you, thank you! Rather, I am speaking now about monthly giving, regular tithing. And if you've recently reviewed your giving, I'm not addressing you.

The PCC can look to trim costs in other places, but the bottom line is the bottom line. If we don't have the money we can't spend it; and sadly, in 5 or 6 months the PCC will have to consider whether to renew our MG contract.

Church: Will we, who have received the abundant generosity of God in Christ surrender our wallets to him who died so we could live? We will commit here and now to give generously, until it hurts as CS Lewis said, to what is close to God's heart? I'll leave that with you.

### **Thirdly, let's consider our community outreach and mission.**

Through several excellent, long-standing ministries we have continued to reach out to and serve the people of Otley. We contribute significantly to the running of the **Otley Foodbank** through people like Barry, Glynis, and Margaret Turner – a lifeline to many. Many of those same people continue faithfully to run **Open House** every Tuesday, providing food, community and support to many in need. Little and Baby Rascals enables fantastic contact with folk who rarely if ever come to church; and in a recent survey attendees expressed their gratitude and warmth for our team in the strongest possible terms.

Something that gets even less profile in church is **Open the Book** – an incredible investment in the lives of the school children of this town, with many gospel seeds planted every week.

Our ability to host external organisations here for their own events has developed over the past year, thanks to Tom Raper and those who have assisted him.

Relatedly, in Sunday worship throughout Lent, we have reflected together on evangelism through the **Talking Jesus Course**, and do begin to hear stories of how many of you are growing in this essential area of discipleship.

And finally, Maria and I have been pioneering an outreach among secondary school children in the market square on Monday afternoons. That is now beginning to gather some momentum, as we are able to have good conversations about God with young people, and express verbally and practically, the love God has for them.

Outreach is not an area many of us relish the prospect of, but it seems that without both growth in holiness and a willingness to be missional and share our faith, the church just doesn't grow – whether spiritually or numerically.

**Let me close with this.**

If you have picked up a copy of *In Touch* this month you will have read some of my thoughts about the so-called Quiet Revival. What I didn't share was that at a recent Christian conference I received a prophetic word that I believe I am to share with you today. It said this:

*Like Joseph, who foresaw seven fat years and seven thin years  
you are about to receive a harvest.  
How will you steward that harvest?*

The thing about the Quiet Revival, according to the research is that it's coming about because of the sovereign work of God. It is not a result of our evangelism. People are just showing up at church, on their own initiative. It is happening all over the country.

And if you haven't noticed we are ourselves experiencing a trickle of new converts. God is at work. There has been a sea change in our society, and there is a renewed openness and curiosity about faith. Indeed, Maria and I have found that in our conversations on the street. Let's make sure that we have something to give them.

Number one:

Let's seek God's face, let's focus our ministry on him, and make sure that Christ really is at the centre – of our hearts, our homes, our church. For then we truly will be a place for everyone. A house of prayer for all nations. Because this isn't our church. It is God's. And we are not our own. We have been bought with a price.

Number two:

Let's give generously to fund the work of passing the faith on to the children and young people of this town.

And number three:

Let's continue to step out in faith and share the good news, and the joy of salvation, our love for Jesus, with the world around us.

AMEN.