**Churchwardens’ Report to the Annual Parish Council Meeting 19th May 2024**

As we approach the end of another year, St Mary’s Ecumenical Church continues to play a central role in our North Marston village life and community. Special services have appealed to a wider congregation than our stalwart regulars, notably the service to commemorate the Coronation of Charles III, the Remembrance Service at the Memorial Hall, and the Christmas Eve ‘Carols by Candlelight’ Service, the latter two services, important events in the village calendar, each attracting around 200 adults and children.

In the twelve months to our APCM this May, we held three weddings, three funerals and one baptism in the Church.

The mission of the church has included an Advent Course, shared with Granborough.

We are very grateful for the faithful commitment of our Clergy and Lay Leaders. Sadly, in May, we said goodbye to our Methodist minister, Rev. Keith Edwards, who will be continuing his ministry in rural Wales. We were pleased to welcome Rev. Richard Atkinson in his place.

We were very grateful to the Parish Council this year for a grant towards the costs of replacing our hymn books.

We said farewell to the Leavers from North Marston School in July 2023. The School pupils, teachers and parents also celebrated Christmas and Harvest in Church, and said their farewells to the Head, Cathy Gouldstone, at Easter.

‘Messy Church’, held once a month on a Sunday afternoon, aimed at primary school-aged children, who can enjoy craft activities, worship and refreshments together, has grown steadily over the past two years, attracting new children and parent helpers.

The members of the Church ‘Eyes and Ears’ team have provided excellent support to our ministers in their pastoral work, dropping cards and paying visits to those around them in need, and those celebrating joyful events.

Outreach, within the North Marston community and beyond, has continued to flourish. The regular weekly coffee mornings and monthly community lunches are popular. The Fundraising Committee has staged a wide range of events enjoyed by the village community. In the last year this has included the ‘Bubbles and Bangers’ party on the green outside the Wesley Centre, the Poetry, Prose and Song Evening, Lights of Friendship, the Living Nativity, and the Burns Night Supper. There was a huge turnout this year for the traditional Easter Egg Rolling, Decorated Egg Competitions and Easter Egg Hunt - the Wesley Centre was packed, and we ran out of bacon butties!

As part of our wider outreach work, we have supported a number of local and national charities this year: The Royal British Legion, The Children’s Society, The Salvation Army, Crisis, Link for Hope, the Women’s Refuge (Aylesbury), the Aylesbury Foodbank and Water Aid We are always mindful, practically, and in our prayers, of the poverty and injustice in the world outside our village.

**St Mary’s Church Building and Churchyards**

For some time now, the condition of our Grade 1 Listed Church has caused us grave concern, due to significant and ongoing movement in the south aisle south wall. Despite extensive pruning of the copper beech tree adjacent to the tower, the movement and resultant cracking in the South Wall has continued.

In the last year, trial pits have been dug, both internally and externally, to investigate the cause of the cracking. Unfortunately, the results of the structural engineer and soil specialist’s analyses have been rather inconclusive. We have therefore been advised to continue to monitor the cracks for at least another twelve months, and, in the meantime, to seek the advice of an arboriculturist regarding the copper beech tree and its possible impact.

As the cracking in the wall ran across an important stained-glass window, we commissioned specialist stained-glass conservators to remove the window so that it could be repaired and stored safely, ready for reinstallation following any remedial works.

The funding of the investigative work, together with the costs of preserving the window and carrying out any remedial work, are hugely challenging to our modest congregation and community. It is very likely that in addition to applying for grants from various sources, we will approach the village community in the future for help in preserving our beautiful church.

The main churchyard and the ‘new’ churchyard have continued to be maintained to a very high standard by our team of sextons. We are desperate for more volunteers, however, to trim and strim around the graves. We are very grateful to Trevor Lane and his team who carried out three days of clearing work in the churchyard.

Our church bells, much admired by bell ringers across the diocese for their lovely sound, continue to ring out three times a month, and for special services. We rely heavily on ringers from other parishes and would love to hear from anyone who would like to give ringing a try! Training is available!

Our teams of flower arrangers and cleaners have continued to ensure that our beautiful church always looks its best for Sunday services and special occasions.

**The Wesley Centre**

We are committed to promoting this attractive venue to potential hirers in order to generate more income. We are working on advertising, including revitalising the website, and would welcome expertise and help from the village community.

We remain immensely grateful to the volunteers who continue to support the work of the Church in the multiplicity of ways outlined above; we could not do what we do without them. We would like to add sincere thanks to the members, and ex officio members, of the ECC for their hard work and dedicated support.

We look forward to another year of shared worship and church family life together.

**Tricia McSweeney**

**Alyson Perrett**

**Churchwardens**