STILL HERE FOR YOU

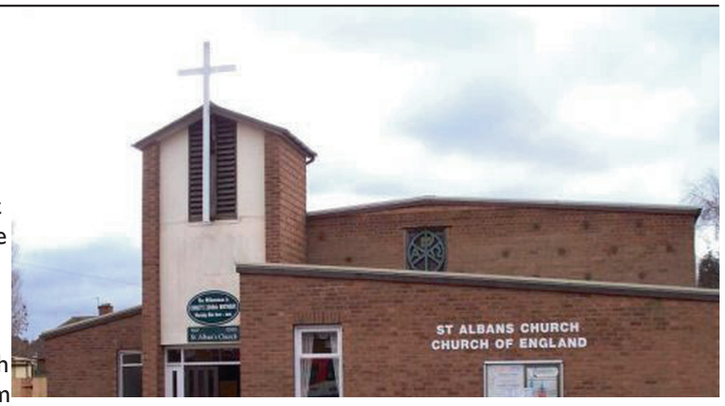
A message from St Alban's Church to the community of Ashmore Park

Working for community – during and beyond Covid

St Alban's Church is all about community. It was built – 54 years ago – by subscriptions and donations from the local community of Ashmore Park. It sits right in the middle of that community – next to the Co-op and across from the rest of the bottom shops. And it has always been about getting people from the local community together.

It hasn't been easy being a community church over the last two years. When your main aim is be a meeting place – somewhere people can meet each other, build community and encounter God – and no-one's allowed to come, you sometimes wonder what you're here for.

But by the grace of God we have managed to keep going, and even to keep serving the community in different ways. And as things start to open up again, we've produced this newsletter to let all of you know that St Alban's Church is still here – for you, just as it always has been.



Why Community?

But why are we so concerned about community? Because it's the job God has given us. Jesus came to take a bunch of outsiders and make them his new family. He made peace between God and people, and then called us to do the same with each other.

Despite all the restrictions on meeting, some of us at St Alban's have had a taste of real community over the last year or two. We'd love you to join us in experiencing it and helping to build it for others. Come along any Sunday at 10am, or any Tuesday between 9 and 11, to find out more.

Building community during lockdown



Online services - from our home to yours



"Cakeaway" - giving away cake, to cheer people up after 15 weeks of lockdown



Outdoor services - safer and more accessible (until it got too cold!)



Ashmore Park Pantry
No-one goes hungry

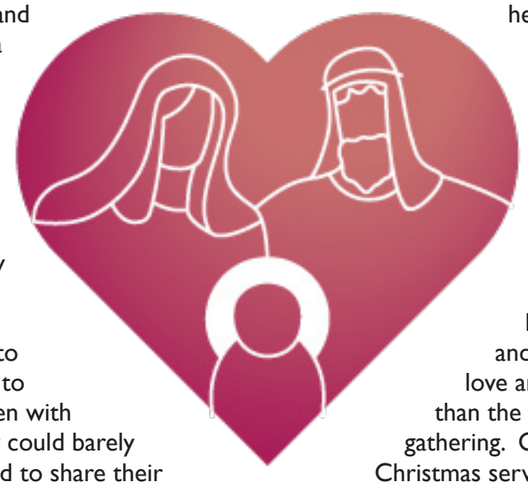


Memorial Garden - stayed open throughout lockdown as a place to reflect and remember

The heart of Christmas

What's the heart of Christmas? For many people, it's getting together with family. Which is why last Christmas was so difficult. Our family all live some distance away, far too far to go for the day, especially after I'd taken a morning service. So after church Helen and I just went back to the vicarage and talked to each other over a rather large turkey.

It felt strange, but maybe it gave us an unusual insight into the first Christmas. Mary and Joseph were away from their home and close family too. An edict from the emperor in Rome had instructed everyone to go to their ancestral home town to register for the census. Even with Mary heavily pregnant, they could barely find a place to sleep and had to share their room with the animals.



But Jesus was even more out of place. Not just because he had to use an animal's feeding trough for his first cot. But because he'd given up heaven to give us Christmas. Since before the beginning of time, he'd been with his family – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But because he cared so much about the human race, he gave all that up for a manger bed in Bethlehem, a simple life in a Galilean fishing community, and then a cruel, painful and unjust death on a Roman cross.

And he did all that, so that we could be adopted into his family, become his children and know his eternal, perfect love and care. That's even better than the very best family Boxing Day gathering. Come along to one of our Christmas services to find out more, and maybe discover it for yourself.



CHRISTMAS AT ST ALBAN'S

Christmas Market: Sat 4th Dec, 9:30-12:30
Christingle Service: Sun 12th Dec, 10am
Pop-in Christmas Special: Tues 14th Dec, 9-11am
Carol Singing: Sat 18th Dec, 10-11am
Carol Service: Sun 19th Dec, 10am
Midnight Communion: Fri 24th Dec, 11:15pm
Family Christmas Service: Sat 25th Dec, 10am

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YouTube Channel: St Albans Ashmore Park
(all Christmas services will be streamed live on YouTube - but please come in person if you can)

What's happening at St Alban's?

St Alban's main service is at 10am every Sunday. Come just as you are, and you can encounter God - just as he is. There's lively music from our own worship group, teaching from the Bible, prayers and breaking bread. We'd love to see you there!
But St Alban's is much more than that. Church members meet through the week, online and at home - and in the building there's a wide range of activities, some run by the church, some by other groups. We asked some of them how Covid had affected them.

Pop-in & Community Café – Tuesday Morning



Pop-in is hard to define…Is it a charity shop? Is it a café? Is it a meeting place? Probably all three. Every other Tuesday, you can come in, get a bargain breakfast or just a cup of coffee, pick up some good second-hand clothes, and meet friends for a chat.

And we're now opening on the intervening Tuesdays too. No second-hand clothes, but you can still get a hot drink, use the foodbank, play a board game or do a jigsaw. Either way, you'll be sure of a warm welcome.

TLC: tea, laughter and chat for toddlers and parents/carers

One of the first things we restarted as a church when we were allowed to this spring was TLC, the stay-end-play toddler group that fills St Alban's with joyful noise and activity every Friday morning.

Many babies who were born in early 2020 had barely seen another child for the first year of their lives. As they made their first, tentative steps towards other children it was lovely to see them learning to interact, share toys and make friends. And for parents, groups like TLC are a lifeline.

At first we had to do TLC without the T (or coffee), and chat had to be socially distanced and with only a couple of others. But that was a start, and last month we decided it was safe to start refreshments again. In order to provide more space, we've expanded into the vicarage garden, so toddlers even get a chance to go on the trampoline.

Ashmore Park Pantry – Tues and Friday

One of the biggest developments at St Alban's happened almost by accident. When the first lockdown started, the landlord of the Ashmore Inn, with his refurbishment on hold, and unable to open as a pub, invited his customers instead to donate food to help needy people in the community. The response was overwhelming, and within a couple of weeks the pub was piled high with tins, packets and toiletries, and the Ashmore Park Food Office was opening three times a week.

But by late May, with the government saying that pubs could re-open in July, he needed the food removed so that he could get the refurbishment going. And so St Alban's inherited a foodbank, and the Ashmore Park Pantry was born.

Over the months the needs have changed. In the early days nothing else was open, so when things ran short we were literally the only place people could go. Some were afraid to go to shops too.



Now it's more likely to be benefits problems or, sadly, domestic violence and abuse. But the need is still there, so we're now working with other groups to try and find a permanent location for the Pantry.

Hub for Grub – Friday lunchtime

Hub for Grub takes food that would have gone to waste – and turns it into delicious, nutritious hot-cooked meals. You can come and pick them up (or stay at church to eat) between 12 and 2 pm any Friday, and it's "Pay what you feel" - if you can't afford it you can have it for free, or if you'd like to make a contribution they accept cash or cards.

Tim Southan explains: *I was running a chef recruitment company, and was contacted by Changes UK - a service for people with alcohol and drug addiction. The manager wanted me to build a business model to use the kitchen to train his clients so they could get back into work. It worked – and they still run a successful coffee shop in Birmingham.*



Using that experience I decided to start Hub For Grub myself, using food from Fareshare. We were about to set it up in 2020… and then came Covid.

As lockdown eased, I started looking for venues, and St Alban's seemed to share our vision, so Ashmore Park has become our first site.

Tea Dance – Tuesday afternoon

If you turn up at St Alban's on a Tuesday afternoon, you'll find it full of happy couples doing sequence, ballroom, and a little bit of line dancing.

Tea dance is a social afternoon for people who don't get out. That meant Covid was hard. We kept in contact via phone, and some people met up in the park. As we've come back together, we find that Covid has aged people because they haven't been exercising, dancing, or getting out as much. But after a couple of weeks, they've got more confident and are back dancing.



We lost a lot of people during the pandemic. I called one of their widows and told them to come and be around people for the company.

I don't think most of our people have been scared to come out. My impression is that they would have been at the tea dance during lockdown if we'd been here.

Choir – Monday Evening

One of the things many of us missed a lot during Covid is singing together. For nearly a year, the only people who could sing in church were the music group, and they had to be behind Perspex screens. But in July we were finally allowed to sing together.

And church became an even more musical place when in September the **Ashmore Park Choir** started meeting again, practicing at St Alban's on a Monday night. They are planning a Christmas concert at St Thomas's Church on ….

Brownies – Tuesday at 5pm

It was horrendous for the girls in covid, because they're so sociable, but they couldn't see anyone.

We tried doing Brownies online but it didn't work – you can't do things together when you're sitting in front of a screen.

When we were first allowed to meet, we had some great sessions in the Vicarage garden and on walks around the estate, but it's too cold for that now, so we're glad to be back in the church building. And the girls seem to like it – the group has grown, but there's still room for more.

Gentle exercise – Mon and Thurs mornings

Mark (on Monday mornings) and Mary (on Thursday mornings) provide opportunities to keep healthy by appropriate exercises.

Mary told us: *I've been teaching Keep fit for 50 years, nearly all my adult life. What I do is a dance based, gentle exercise made for the older age group to work on stretching, strengthening our muscles, working on our cardiovascular system to get the heartrate up, focusing on flexibility, balance, posture, and coordination as they become weaker as you get older.*

Covid and lockdown stopped us meeting as a group in person but I kept in contact with the women via email and phone while always reminding them to keep good posture and to keep fit. When we were finally able to meet in person, I had to divide the group into two and run two smaller classes to keep the numbers safe.

Many older people have been lonely and not been able to get out because of Covid. Often their families were worried and wanted to protect them, but you still have to live.

Slimming groups – Wednesday and Thursday

Three slimming groups provide encouragement and mutual support to eat well and adopt a healthy lifestyle. Debbie (Wed morning) and Tina (Thursday) evening, run **Slimming World** groups, while Paula now runs the the **WW** (formerly Weightwatchers) group on Wednesday evening.