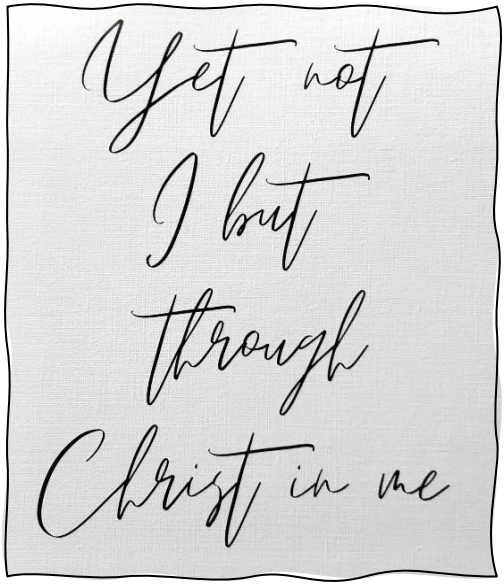
St Alban's Church

Annual Report 2023-24



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Vicar's report

The time since the last annual report has not been a year of major change for St Alban's, but rather of steady rebuilding after the disruptions of Covid-19 followed by the leadership changes in 2022.

The improvements to the building and sound system, growth of Messy Church and developments on the site next door are all documented elsewhere in this report, and as a church we can be very grateful to all those who have worked so hard to make those things happen.

Personally, I am indebted to Terry, Sam, Barry and Tracy for their support as part of the Ministry Team and/or Wardens group. It has been a privilege and a joy to work with them.

The continuing vacancy at St Thomas's, especially since Rev Derek D'Sousa ended his interim ministry last September, has put significant pressure on my time – primarily on baptisms, funerals and weddings – and I look forward to being able to focus more fully on the work at St Alban's once Rev Kate starts her ministry in the parish in June.

Along with many others, I have found the developments in the wider Church of England this last year confusing and troubling. The House of Bishops' decision to endorse prayers that conflict with the church's doctrine of marriage is unprecedented and has left the church painfully divided. The repercussions will continue to be felt in the months ahead, and we need to remain vigilant in prayer and committed to the gospel.

Rev Tom

Lay Reader's report

It has been another interesting and enjoyable year for me in my ministry role as lay reader. It hasn't been without its challenges, but such challenges are opportunities for growth and development.

I am grateful to be part of a ministry team with Tom, Sam and Helen. We meet on a weekly basis to plan services which includes looking at passages that we will be preaching on. It is a supportive meeting and I really value it. It's been good to work with Sam in her role as Children and Families Worker—this is a key role in the church if the church is to have a future and it is of vital importance that we support Sam in her role and recognise the work she does with many families in the community.

My role as lay reader is varied and includes leading and preaching at services both at St Alban's and St Thomas's, officiating at funerals, and pastoral work both within the church community and with bereaved families. I also have a role in benefits advocacy along with Mavoureen and we have been successful in accessing benefits for several people in the past year. Along with Mavoureen I have established the 'Lambert and Braithwaite Foundation' in Nigeria (more information about this under Charitable Giving).

More recently I have taken part in the Life Exhibition along with Tom, Helen and Sam. This was an exhibition about the life of Jesus held at St Matthews Church for years 4 and 5 from St Alban's School and St Thomas's school. This was really positively received by the pupils and staff of both schools and really enthused me about work with children and how important it is in the life of any church.

We have agreed to restart what was called 'St Alban's Thought for the Day' on YouTube although we will be starting with just a weekly thought and seeing how that goes. This proved really popular during the period of Covid when we did over three hundred videos between us. It is another way of reaching people by looking at the world through the prism of the Gospel.

I attended the annual lay readers conference during February and the main speaker was from an organisation called 'Unlock'. Unlock's work is focused on the most deprived communities in the UK, reaching out to those on the margins of society. They work with those who have never been made to feel as though their voices are heard or their stories matter. Unlock tackles exclusion; cultural exclusion from the church which results in a perception

that some people are not good enough to matter to God. There was much to learn about enabling people who learn orally and the need to hear their stories and to open the Bible to them. This is something I would like to explore further in the coming year.

I am about to begin a bereavement support group in the next few months prompted by the ongoing needs of some of the people I have met in officiating at funerals who are struggling with loss. Two or three of those people are keen to be founder members and establish such a group. In preparation I want to have some consultation with our local funeral directors who we already work closely with.

I am looking forward to another year in my lay reader journey.

Terry Braithwaite - Lay Reader

Fabric of the Church Building

Following the Quinquennial Inspection of the building and grounds in November 2022, there were 21 items where urgent remedial action was identified or recommended. A few minor items were immediately dealt with, but the more expensive items listed in last year's Annual Report were mostly dealt with during 2023.

1. The old wooden front church entrance doors were replaced by new UPVC doors.
2. Damp in the vestry was removed and a Positive Input Ventilator was installed to avoid further problems.
3. Above the new doors, the cross was repainted and cracked tower rendering was replaced and painted.
4. The rusty gas heaters in the lobby and St. Alban's Room were removed.
5. The side gate (adjacent to the Community Project area) was replaced.

Following the vandalism of the church curtains, the DCC agreed to replace with screens rather than new curtains. Fortunately, the Insurance Company were happy to pay the full curtain replacement cost and this has left some money over towards a new stage carpet.

We were also fortunate to receive a grant from a Diocesan charity to cover the costs of a new cooker and cookware for the kitchen.

A complete new Sound System was also installed early in 2024, with the full cost being covered by a donation so no impact on church finances.

Overall, the church building is in need of a little t.l.c. and we hope there may be some church members and/or family willing to give some time in 2024. If YOU have any particular trade skills which can be put to good use, please do see me!!

Barry Bishop - Warden

Finance / Treasurer's report

2023 was my 7th year as St. Albans DCC Treasurer, and I would like to thank everyone who contributed in any way towards church finances and God's work here and in the community last year.

Our finances have now been online via My Fund Accounting for three full years and has continued to help us maintain a more accurate picture of our financial position and making reporting figures much easier.

The Financial Review included with the Annual report gives more detailed information on our Income and Expenditure, but the following may be of interest.

Our 'Unrestricted' Income (excluding Foodbank) for 2023 was just under £55,000 and our Expenditure was just over £59,000. Our 'Deficit' for the year was therefore £4,457. As I indicated in last year's Report, this was primarily due to increased Parish Share, much higher Utility Bills and a drop in Congregational Giving. We continue to rely heavily on Hall Hire and Rental

Income, and we are very grateful to those who have increased their giving, but we still need to increase Income to cover our costs.

We spent over £12,000 last year on major repairs and renovation projects (see Church Fabric report) so have very little remaining reserve funds.

My thanks again to Brian for handling Gift-Aid and banking, and the Money-Counting Team for dealing with weekly donations.

In conclusion, in 2024 we will do our very best to remain financially viable to continue God's work in this church and local community, with His and your help.

Barry Bishop - Treasurer

Gift Aid report

I would like to thank all who open the envelopes and count the money after the service. We have gained three more gift-aiders during this year.

If anyone is interested in becoming a Gift Aider or requires more information (which is confidential of course), or any of the current gift aiders would prefer to use a bankers order and not envelopes, please contact Rev Tom, Barry Bishop (Treasurer), or myself, Gift Aid Secretary. We will let you have the information required for your bank.

The amount to be claimed back from the tax office for this year will be approximately £3500 . I would urge anyone who gives a donation to the church, if you are a tax payer, to please Gift Aid it. For every £1 donated we can claim 25p from the tax office.

In addition to the above Gift Aid, there is a scheme which started in the 2013/2014 tax year known as GADS (Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme). This is a tax relief on loose plate giving and non-gift aid envelope monies. Non-Gift Aid envelope money and small cash donations of up to £30 maximum are acceptable, but not cheques. This is without the need for a Gift Aid

declaration. The maximum loose cash we can claim against has been increased to £8000. This would give a possible tax return of £2000.

Our tax relief will be down this year by about 30% due to very little loose cash on the plate. Let us hope that things will improve.

Please stay safe.

Brian Daybell (Gift Aid Secretary)

Electoral Roll

St Alban's Electoral Roll was 79 at the time of the last Annual General Meeting, of whom all but 17 live in the parish.

Brian Daybell (Electoral Roll Officer)

DCC Secretary's report

Over the past year, the DCC has endeavoured to convene bi-monthly, with occasional adjustments to accommodate exceptional circumstances. Throughout this period, the DCC has held six in-person meetings, maintaining a commendable 74% attendance rate.

The DCC Treasurer has consistently presented a verbal report on Income and Expenditure, supplemented by the availability of Balance Sheets and a Fund Movement Summary for those interested. Furthermore, the Treasurer has devised a simplified information sheet to distil complex data into an easily digestible format.

Throughout these gatherings, the DCC has delved into various pertinent topics, most notably addressing the findings of the Quinquennial report and the ensuing necessary actions. Discussion has also revolved around the regrettable "break out" incident, exploring measures taken to safeguard the church and deliberating on the allocation of received insurance funds.

Among the array of topics discussed, noteworthy mentions include "Ashmore Park Foodbank," "First Aid," "Health and Safety," and "Fire Safety Officers." Additionally, deliberations have extended to matters concerning Caring Hearts and the Car Lot tenants.

DCC members: Rev Tom, Terry Braithwaite, Barry Bishop, Tracy Yates, Bethanie Craddock, Brian Daybell, Margaret O'Callaghan, Deb Dale, Dave Craddock, Sam Crosby, Mandy Pugh, Robert Follows, Tony Beardsmore, Sue Cope, Arch Palmer, Paula McInally

Bethanie Eliza Craddock

Safeguarding and Compliance

St Alban's had been without a Safeguarding Co-Ordinator for some considerable time and I volunteered to temporarily fill this vital position. This was a role I undertook before being licensed as a Lay Reader, but I feel that I can only hold this on a temporary basis; because of the other responsibilities of my role as Lay Reader and Parish Warden.

I feel strongly that if we, as a church, take safeguarding seriously this should be represented by someone in this position. I would ask each one of you to think about whether you can take on this role. The following is part of the official Church of England's commitment to safeguarding.

The Church is committed to safeguarding as an integral part of its ministry and mission, promoting a safer culture and the welfare of every child, young person and adult. As such, the Church has robust policies, procedures and guidelines in place, to ensure good practice throughout the central organisation, its 42 dioceses and other Church bodies.

The Church of England will:

- *Promote a safer environment and culture*
- *Safely recruit and support all those with any responsibility related to children and vulnerable adults within the Church*

- *Respond promptly to every safeguarding concern or allegation*
- *Care pastorally for victims/survivors of abuse and other affected persons*
- *Care pastorally for those who are the subject of concerns or allegations of abuse and other affected persons*
- *Respond to those that may pose a present risk to others*

Please consider whether you could be the person to fill this position.

Terry Braithwaite

Worship and Teaching

Since our last annual meeting we have had two major teaching series on Sunday mornings. The first, from May to July last year looked at the very first days of the early church, from Acts chapters 1 to 13.

For the rest of 2023 we followed the lectionary, which took us into the critical point in Jesus' ministry in Matthew 13-16, the challenging teaching of Matthew 20-25, and the practical application of the gospel in Romans 12-14 and Philippians 1-2.

Then from mid-January through to just before Easter, we followed the Bible Society's Romans Course, both on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings in discussion format.

Monthly all-age services have continued to offer a different flavour to our normal services, but we have largely tried to keep them to the same topics as our preaching series.

In the autumn a group of about 10 people took part in Christianity Explored, the first enquirers course we have run for some time, and found it very helpful in explaining the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

It has been good to have Sam Crosby and more recently Laura Gilmore joining with Terry and me in leading services.

Our musical worship has continued to be ably supported by John Miller on organ, Kemsi on keyboard, OJ on drums and Barry's vocals, plus an occasional vicar on guitar.

Rev Tom

Sound and Vision

Current team: Mark and Tracy Yates, John Billau, Arch Palmer, Dave Craddock, Ral Okeke, Laura Gilmore, Helen Fish

The purpose of the team is

- to make all aspects of the service comfortably audible, via the speakers and the hearing aid loop
- to operate the slide shows on the projectors
- and to publish sound recordings of Sunday mornings for those who can't get here. (If you miss a week and want to catch up, go to https://saintalbanschurch.co.uk/resources/sunday-services and click on the date you want. The recording is usually there by about 4pm on the Sunday afternoon.)

We have seen big changes this year, following a very generous anonymous donation towards upgrading/replacing the aging sound system. No longer do we have to wheel the trolley with the mixer desk and amplifier out of the locked store every time we need to use them. No longer do we have to hope that everything will work first time… or keep working once we get it going. And no longer are the voices from the speakers muffled and indistinguishable, nor the sound on the loop harsh and crackly.

These days, if you see one (or more) of us with our heads down, absorbed in the tablet computer, we're not being recycled teenagers – that's how we control the mixer. It's quite a learning curve, so thank you all for your patience with us. There have been remarkably few hiccups along the way.

But from what people have said, we think you agree that it's a huge improvement.

Facebook

St Alban's Facebook Page now has 892 followers (up from 773 last year) and 22 new likes in the last 28 days alone. Our top post for the last year was an advert for places for TLC at 3751 views, next was our hall hire advert at 1100 views.

Breaking the followers down more, we can see that females are our main followers at 84%, where males were 16%. Also followers in the 35-44 age bracket are our top followers as shown in the table:

HIGHEST TO LOWEST FOLLOWERS BY AGE
35-44
65+
25-34
45-54
55-64
18-24

Our Facebook page is updated weekly by Katie Hart and others to publicise events and other notices, make suggestions for Foodbank donations, advertise our prayer areas etc.

Katie Hart

Pop-In

Pop in is open once a fortnight on a Tuesday, and is a place where there is a selection of second hand clothing, bric-a-brac and other goodies. The team serve hot breakfasts, hot drinks and toast, and there are great opportunities for conversation and fellowship.

Attendance at Pop-in has continued to be strong, so much so that at times recently it has been hard to find a table. People seem to be coming in more for food and fellowship, and probably therefore staying longer, so there has often been a very lively atmosphere.

We are very grateful to the team – Wendy, Robert, Gladys, Helen, Jen, Rose, Jose, Ron, Reuben and Trevor – who set everything up, sort clothes and other donations, cook and serve countless breakfasts, and then clear up afterwards in time for Tea Dance.

Rev Tom

Summer and Christmas Fayres

Sam Crosby took on overall leadership for both the Summer and Christmas Fayres in 2023, and gave them a more family-oriented feel, with crafts and games for children – many of them outdoors for the summer fayre.

In the autumn, she also arranged a table-top "craft fair", an idea that has been discussed for some time.

As a result, despite missing John Edwards' amazing tables full of plants, and not having a Santa's Grotto at Christmas, the total money raised compared favourably with the previous year.

Rev Tom

Children and families

Kids Church

We have a varied age range in Kids Church. Organising sessions are a little tricky so everyone can enjoy and learn from it.

We are currently planning a programme for each term. This is a way for the children to explore the Bible in more depth.

Katie Keay has offered to join the team, which is brilliant. Katie has some brilliant ideas how we can socialise more and potentially grow our youth. We are always needing more people to lead and assist, please see me if this is something that you are interested in.

We are looking at renaming our kids church into something more appealing, with a personalised logo, watch this space.

If there are any questions you want to ask, please feel free to come and see me. God bless, Sam.

TLC

In July we broke up for the summer with a big party. TLC reached its 10th birthday last year, and we thought it was only right to celebrate this milestone. We were also celebrating that many of our children (who had been with us since they were babies), were leaving us to start their next adventures in nursery or Reception.

When we came back in September the number of children attending was around 10/13. We spoke about advertising to bring more numbers in; after chatting to Katie (who made us a lovely poster), we have been inundated with calls with people wanting places for their children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews etc. We currently now have a small waiting list due the high demand.

I do want to mention our lovely helpers, without these people TLC wouldn't be as lovely and organised and welcoming. Robert and Reuben are superstars for helping set up early every Friday morning. Robert also comes and puts everything away for us too - thank you both! Tony is there every week welcoming the children and their families, showing them around, chatting to them and making them feel relaxed. Our lovely ladies, Pat, Marg and Vonnie, who run the snack table. Every week they go and fetch the crisps, biscuits, milk, and fruit. Unfortunately, Marg and Vonnie haven't been able to attend much over the last 6 weeks or so due to bad health - everyone at TLC wishes them and their loved ones a speedy recovery. We are grateful to Helen Hammond for stepping in to help while they've been away. Lastly a big thank you to Tom and Helen.

Messy Church

Over the last 12 months Messy Church has been a great success. It is very well received by the children and their families - we vary from month to month with numbers, some months we have 3 families others we have 12.

We had a programme about Noah's Ark during the summer holidays. This took place every Wednesday and numbers were between 14 and 28. We had some families that attend Messy Church regularly, and some who attended just from hearing about it via Facebook and word of mouth. Feedback from the children and their parents was positive, they would love to see this again or something similar for summer '24. For this to happen we need a group of people on hand to help. Please see me if this is something you would like to do.

We have a group of 4 church volunteers, Helen, Tom, myself and Tony. We have a few of the lovely parents who help with cooking and serving the drinks. We have recently changed the time to 10.30am till 12.00pm; this seems to work better for the families who just want a little lay in on a Saturday.

If you would like to know any more about Messy Church, have any ideas or would like to volunteer please come and see me.

Sam Crosby

St Alban's School

Partnership

Sam and I have continued to take Collective Worship (assembly) at school every Tuesday afternoon, and the school came to church for two successful Christmas services. We are in the process of setting up a link between St Alban's School and the school in Nigeria that we support as a church.

Governance

Mrs Jo Robinson left the school at the end of the summer term, and was replaced as headteacher by Mrs Leanne Wooldridge. In parallel with that change, the Manor Trust that runs St Alban's and St Thomas's schools, along with 7 others, decided to replace the Local Governing Board for each school with a "Parent and Community Advisory Forum", in order to allow the meetings to focus more on things of interest to parents and the local

community. The church still has two places on the new group, and Rev Tom and Sam Crosby were appointed to fill those roles.

SIAMS

In November the school had a SIAMS (Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools) inspection, to assess the impact that the school's Christian vision has on the life of the school. The inspectors' report was very positive, concluding that the school was "living up to its foundation as a Church school".

Rev Tom

Ashmore Park Foodbank

The Foodbank continues to serve those in need in the local community, opening twice a week to make sure that no-one goes hungry. The ongoing cost of living crisis has meant that demand has remained high, and we have had to supplement the food donations we receive by buying supplies of several critical items. This has only been possible thanks to a few individuals in the local community who provide significant regular financial support to the foodbank.

Bethanie Craddock stepped down from her role as Foodbank coordinator in the summer, after being a key member of the team since the early days in 2020, and overall coordinator since March 2022. We are very grateful to her for all the effort she put into it, and for helping establish processes that have continued to serve us well since she stepped down.

We were delighted that Sue Kennedy agreed to take on the role of coordinator in September. Her cheerful face and pragmatic approach have been a great blessing to the team and to all the clients.

In September the shelving in the St Alban's Room was moved – partly to the narrow room under the loft, partly to a new storeroom established in the Caring Hearts building.

We have continued to receive a half share of the foodbank donations from Sainsburys in Wednesfield, and have also received generous donations from several local schools, both around Harvest and at Christmas.

Rev Tom and Sue Kennedy

St Alban's Community Project

The vision for the St Alban's Community Project is for the plot of land next to the East of the church to be used for community and church purposes, primarily by offering affordable space to a variety of charities and social enterprises.

At the time of the last report, Caring Hearts had just opened their Charity Shop, and we had also just entered into a short-term agreement with Waseem and Imran Raja for them to use the rest of the site to park cars which they sell online.

That arrangement has continued since, with the site earning the parish slightly more rent than we had previously been receiving from Ashmore Autos.

A number of discussions are underway, and we are hopeful that we will soon be able to move towards the next stage of the project.

Rev Tom

Mission Partnership

St Christopher's School, Uzuakole, Ahia State, Nigeria.

As many of you will be aware Mavoureen and I travelled to Nigeria in July 2023 to meet up again with Rev Lambert Onoh, and see the developments that have been taking place at St Christopher's School. This was not an easy trip and it highlighted some of the day to day difficulties that impact many of the country's citizens. We were constantly stopped by police and army roadblocks that seemed to be in evidence every few hundred metres.

We were held up at gunpoint when tensions became fraught and thankfully were diffused by the skills of our constant armed bodyguards. We travelled more than last time on this particular trip; and travelling is fraught with difficulties given some of the political tensions and poor road infrastructure that exists. In addition to the lack of basic amenities such as access to fresh water.

Whilst there we attended a national church conference in Enugu, where we were both honoured by the Prelate of the Nigerian Methodist Church, with Knighthoods for services to humanity. We hope that we can use that honour to draw attention to some of the most pressing needs in the community of Uzuakole and, in particular, St Christopher's School.

We visited various schools in the area and were made to feel very welcome. We were told that our visits offered encouragement to both staff and pupils but, as ever, we received far more than we gave.

There have been many wonderful developments, partly supported by St Alban's, at St Christophers since our previous trip. You will recall that the first project we supported was to get a borehole drilled so that the school and local community had access to fresh water. This development has made a huge difference. As a result of the borehole Rev Lambert has started a fish farm, farming catfish to not only provide a source of food to the schoolchildren but also to sell at the local market with the money raised going back into the school to improve facilities. Rev Lambert has also started to grow crops, again to feed the children, but also to sell surplus at the market. Without the borehole these initiatives would have been impossible.

The school now has around fifteen computers which are essential for the children to develop computer skills and to be able to access information for their educational development. This has resulted in many families wanting their children to attend St Christopher's as many schools do not have such equipment. We have also been able to help provide two printers which means that the school does not have to rely on a local outlet several miles away that charge for printing.

We have, in the past year, provided the means to buy a second generator. Previously the one generator was shared between the borehole and the school and had to be carried from one place to the other whichever was needing to use it at any one time. This has been a real help to everyone.

We are now looking at the possibility of creating a simple science laboratory for the pupils to have the ability to practically develop their scientific knowledge.

We are looking to develop a link between St Alban's School and St Christopher's and we are in the process of negotiating this. We see it important that children in both schools will have an understanding of what life is like in another country. We don't know as yet how exactly this will pan out, but we hope that children will link up with each other and that we will be able to communicate directly through FaceTime or Teams. It is an exciting prospect that I hope will come to fruition. Rev Lambert is very keen for this to happen.

I know Rev Lambert is very grateful for the support that St Alban's offer and you will see that he is very proactive in developing spin offs from the various practical supports that we have been able to help with; he is keen to develop self-sufficiency in many areas. Our communication with him is regular, several times a week and this is a clear safeguard to make sure that any financial support is used well with a clear identification of things that are needed.

I would ask that you keep Lambert and his family in your prayers, they are doing wonderful work in very difficult circumstances.

Terry and Mavoureen Braithwaite

Annual Meeting

The **Annual District Church Meeting** for St Alban's District will start after the 10am service on Sunday 21st April 2024, at St Alban's Church.

Agenda

1. Nomination of Parish Warden
2. Election of District Wardens
3. Apologies for absence
4. Approval of minutes of the 2023 Annual Meeting
5. Electoral Roll report
6. Elections
    a. DCC Secretary and Treasurer
    b. Lay members of the PCC
    c. Lay members of the DCC
    d. Electoral Roll Officer
7. Finance
    a. Presentation of the Financial Report and Accounts for the year ended 31st December 2023
    b. Appointment of Independent Financial Examiner
    c. Charitable giving
8. Annual Report and vision for the future
9. Any other urgent business – notified prior to start of meeting
10. Closing prayer and worship

The Annual *Parochial* Church Meeting (for the Wednesfield Team Ministry) will take place at St Thomas's Church, on Sunday 28th April, 2024 at 6:30 pm.