
Temple Cowley United Reformed Church
Minister's Report to AGM
2007

2007 feels a bit like ‘the year in which things went quiet’. The ‘visible programme’ of the church’s life — the ‘advertised programme’, if you like, wasn’t much more than Sunday morning worship, Wendy’s Friday Night Meal, and the monthly Retirees’ Lunch. There haven’t been any of the larger initiatives that have punctuated the calendar in previous years. In fact, I think, there have been some significant changes (for both good and ill) taking place.

On the downside, we have lost — or effectively lost — a number of members, mostly for good reasons not bad. We were delighted to celebrate Bridget Banks’ ordination with her in Crawley and see her inducted there as a minister. Thanks are due to Tony Brett who hired the bus and did the driving. Tony himself has now transferred to St Columbas so that he and Gordon can be part of the same congregation, and we’ve strongly encouraged him in that. Wendy White, also, has been absent more than present this year — at least on Sunday morning — due to the combined pressure of the third (yes, third!) year of her ordination training course at STETS in Salisbury, an increasingly pressurised job and complicated preparations for her move to Lancashire this month. These have been complicated even more in recent months by the death of Pat Oliver’s father and problems organising housing for Pat up there. Behind the scenes she has continued to produce a stream of creative ideas and together with others has kept the ‘Friday Night Meal’ going. Friday nights have increasingly become, in my view, an extremely important part of our church life, and with Wendy’s departure I am giving a lot of thought as to how to pick up and run with that particular ball. Recently we have also lost, through sudden death, Val

Beech and (last summer) Jean Carter after a traumatic and lengthy illness. Both of these women were stalwarts of the church, albeit ‘behind the scenes’ rather than up front, and played an important part in the hospitality the church has provided.

So we have lost both important ‘behind the scenes’ workers and ‘front of house’ worship leaders. It took us a while to realise that we are not quite so capable of leading Sunday worship from within our own resources as we were when I was on sabbatical in 2002-03. The up-side of that is that we are seeing a wider range of visiting preachers on Sundays.

Doreen Wright stands down from the Elders’ Meeting formally at this AGM, and I shall miss her immensely. Her practical and pastoral wisdom — spotting the needs and opportunities that no one else spots, and then seeing that it is acted on — have been a great encouragement and strength. Although not strictly part of our church’s life and work, I absolutely must acknowledge her sterling work on behalf of the Cowley Child Contact Centre. By single-handedly raising something like £12,000 in the last six months she has given this valuable project a secure future. Audrey Baughan has enjoyed (I think!) discovering her ministry as an elder, and we’ve enjoyed having her on board.

The Retirees’ Lunch continues to be an important part of church life for older members, and thanks are due to Eileen Risbridger, Shirley Avery, David Cook, Mary Boylon, Margaret Woodward and all those who work to make it such a success. During the year we’ve lost two members through death, albeit members worshipping in other churches : Gwen Elderfield and Millicent

Goodwin, who will forever be remembered as the frail elderly lady that restacked the shelves in the Coop as a guerilla action to promote Fair Trade!

Frances Thomas organised (with her usual efficiency) another church holiday which also provided a valuable social get-together for retired and semi-retired members and friends, and helped strengthen bonds with our sister churches in Oxford through the participation of some of their members.

A couple of personal celebrations took place during the year. Eileen Hayes' 90th birthday was marked with a special concert, and I was delighted to attend Clifford Bertram's admission ceremony to British citizenship at County Hall (after nearly 50 years in this country!)

Whilst the long-standing members and friends of Temple Cowley continue to participate and support week in and week out, we are rarely without a visitor on Sunday, often from overseas. Some stay for a good while, others are passing through. My memory and record-keeping fail me, but I think it was during this church year that Udaya and Sumana Bandhopadhyay and their children Kushi and Jeet moved on to Sunbury. That also meant losing the regular visits of Sumana's parents. The whole family had brought a ray of sunshine with them. During the year, Xiaopin Ma, a Christian from mainland China, worshipped with us for a while. She was lodging with her daughter who was worshipping at St Ebbes, and eventually, Mrs Ma joined her daughter there. Monty Tau from Botswana was with us for a while, but we've lost contact. Maggie Sruakpate from Ghana has come and stayed, and become a welcome regular presence on Sunday morning, Friday evening and the Retirees' lunch. She

brings with her rich experience from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana. James Lemanis has also come and stayed with us — he is a postgraduate architecture student at Oxford Brookes University. James scored a record £90 for Christian Aid when a number of us went collecting in the city during One World Week (his record increased to nearly £200 during 4½ hours in Christian Aid Week).

The children from Saunders Road — those that have not reached the age when Sunday morning football clubs become an attractive alternative — have continued to be a lively part of our Sunday morning.

We've been very conscious of the trials of our friends Gemma and Toby Wright this year as they have had to contend with Toby's frustrating and disabling illness and the sudden and shocking death of Gem's father in Spain.

It is thanks to Gemma that a proper Bible Study group kicked up this year, meeting on Wednesday nights. She it was who rose to a challenge I issued during a sermon and said that *she* was interested in getting to grips with the Bible, if no one else was! I did a lot of homework in order to present "The Bible from Scratch". A couple of people who started out on the journey left the group after a couple of months, but then a couple of people joined — people not formally associated with any church. I greatly welcome having this in the church's calendar as a regular place where we can do some proper theological thinking together. That sounds rather high-flying, but I hope it isn't. After all, 'theology' simply means 'talk about God'.

I must note that much I've reported here is only what is 'above the waterline'. There is an enormous amount of pastoral support and communication going on 'below the waterline'.

The building itself, thanks to the redevelopment pioneered by previous minister Elizabeth Gray-King, has continued to be a keystone rather than a millstone in our church's mission. In fact, the income it generates is (only slightly) subsidising the church's own work — which really ought to be met out of our own giving and fundraising.

During the year the Healthy Living Centre trust wound itself up, believing that it had fulfilled all its original objectives. After considerable time and effort on the part of Jim Hansford (and, to a lesser extent, me) — and with the valuable help of Stuart MacLean at the Wessex Trust — a 3-year lease was negotiated with the Oxford Parent Infant Project (OxPiP). OxPiP, as I write, are redeveloping the office space with a partition dividing it into two.

The ecumenical scene is an important part of the context in which we operate. During the year, a Brazilian Pentecostal Group came and went (without notice, and with hiring fees owing!), having worshipped here on Saturday evenings. They had proved pretty impossible to have a working relationship with as a result of being an apparently very disorganised set-up. By contrast the Asian Christian Living Fellowship, worshipping in Punjabi, are back with us, and this is a happy and constructive relationship which (if Richard Chand and I had time) we'd both, I'm sure, want to make more of.

Andrew McKearney has come to St Mary's Iffley in place of Richard Lee, Dan Haylett has left his lay worker post at Rose Hill Methodist Church to train for Methodist ministry, Margreet Armitstead is the very welcome appointment at SS Mary & Nicholas, Littlemore (though quite what John Henry Newman would have made of it I don't know!). St James Cowley have appointed a new vicar who starts this summer. I was very pleased to be invited to have a meal at St James and meet the three prospective candidates.

There have been further Zone discussions amongst the URCs in Oxford following the decision to wind up District Councils. We know that the deployment of paid ministry posts is going to be problematic. My own view is that the Holy Spirit knows what she is doing and "all will be well" provided we are flexible enough to respond to the opportunities that continually come 'out of the blue'.

The last of these is what is becoming generally known as 'The Vision' for Temple Cowley which has appeared in the last couple of months. Until the church has decided what to do about this, it is premature to comment on it here, but I do have a feeling that if this year has had something of a fallow feeling about it (and that would be putting it fairly mildly — earlier this year I was beginning to wonder what God was up to) it may only be because the Holy Spirit has been clearing the way and preparing the ground for new life that we couldn't have expected or thought of otherwise.