

This year has been a particularly exciting one with groups and projects we have started over the last couple of years maturing, and new initiatives springing up organically out of our prayers and visions for our church and community.

We are being constantly blessed at St. Leonard's with people using their gifts and talents to serve God and one another in new way, but also, crucially, keeping all the 'bread and butter' tasks in the church going so the newer things can flourish.

I, along with the Safeguarding and Health and Safety officer have completed the first level of SQP- an online safeguarding tool and reviewed our Health and Safety procedures. Members of the congregation working with young people have been DBS checked and a number of us have received training from the Diocese. However, good safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults is the responsibility of all of us, and as such everyone will be invited to join in with some awareness sessions in the coming year.

Little Leo's, morning prayer, our Home Group meetings and socials, visits to Glen Arun, Fish and Chip nights, home communions and our work taking Funerals and Baptisms have all continued, and weekly services have generally been well attended – particularly on the first and third Sundays. This year all our sidespersons have been trained on welcoming well and various elements of Health and Safety. On the third Sunday we now take the children out during the sermon and intercessions for age-specific teaching and this is proving valuable. We have also had a number of special services on Sunday mornings including from the liturgy of Iona, Godly play, and a café church focussing on our Mental Health a facilitator from Anchor Christian Counselling. We are blessed to have a flexible building to explore different types of worship.

Building on new growth through baptisms and community links we ran our first Families Afternoon comprising of bouncy castle fun, worship and cake. This was highly successful and will be repeated during the rest of the year. Consideration of how we nurture this group moving forward – the majority of them are not communicants and have little experience or knowledge of the gospel is a priority.

We have a good profile on social media and this leads to interest in the church and the hall which is extremely well used by local groups who we have an excellent relationship with. In fact, this year the Short Mat bowls groups came to a church social and showed us how to play- with mixed results!

Following on from Margaret's audit of how we look after people within our church and further afield we have had training sessions on pastoral care and listening skills, some jointly with Southwater church, and we continue to support people in times of need. We have a number of vulnerable adults in our local community who we help and we take communion to people in their homes. Margaret attended a training day on how we help those in their later years grow spiritually and we have begun a monthly group called LINK in order to fill this gap and also pick up some of those we encounter who are bereaved – particularly after funerals.

In terms of one off events, this year we have a Church BBQ, we took part in the Bennetts Field Funday, had our own Open Day, we had a Vision Day which has helped shaped the work of the DCC this year, there was an enjoyable trip to the Wintershall Nativity, a New Year lunch held at the Vicarage, and our Winter Fayre. We had a 'Remembering Loved Ones' service and tea which was well received by the local community.

At Christmas we had over 120 people at our Christmas Eve service. I was also able to lead Carols at the Phoenix stroke club. Easter day was also well attended with 61 people present. Next year I'm sure we'll need to open up the dividing doors! On Maundy Thursday we had a charity supper to raise money for our Lent Charity – Water Aid. I was delighted to hear a comment from a fairly new member of the church who said how nice it was that everyone just helped out like a big family rather than having to be designated jobs. This is definitely a strength of our church.

Our work in schools has grown with both Heron Way and Kingslea visiting the church this year. Communication with Kingslea continues to be difficult; however I am now the Local Authority Governor at Heron Way and am the link for PSHCE and disadvantaged children. I take assemblies in the school regularly and we have had two full days (one of which with an open afternoon for the parents) exploring the Christmas and Easter stories. I was able to take two Godly play practitioners into the school to work with year one, and I now also meet with some parents monthly to pray for the school.

One of the joys of this year was the response to our Stewardship Campaign. Thanks to the generosity of our congregation, our giving has increased by 14.5% this year. In order to keep costs low, we have reduced the hours of our cleaners and have had regular cleaning and maintenance days.

In the wider Team, we have had monthly prayer meetings with the other churches, a joint New Year service, and a pulpit swap. We have also taken part in Horsham Churches Together events and projects and I am now on the Executive Committee. It is great to see members of our congregation helping with the Night Shelter and Foodbank and sharing the Gospel in their everyday lives. We have a number of vulnerable people in our community and find them coming to St. Leonard's for shelter. The church congregation is inclusive and welcoming and a safe place is provided here for many who are struggling.

Looking forward, due to the increase in activities happening at the church, it will be necessary to reorder the way the DCC works so that we can share the load more effectively and involve the whole church in taking ownership of different areas of church life. Those on the DCC will be split into co-coordinating groups (COGs), and these will co-opt members of the congregation to help with various tasks.

In terms of worship moving forward, we will continue to do something different on the fifth Sunday of the month – our next two being a 'Songs of Praise and Sarah from BEATS coming to update us on the charity. We are currently having a Sermon Series working our way through the different parts of the Eucharist and are making significant improvements to our welcome, particularly by having a dedicated area in the hall sharing church life and events and offering opportunities for visitors to request prayers.

I am extremely grateful to the entire congregation who faithfully share the gospel with one another and with those they meet in their daily lives. We go forward remembering that commitment to our personal discipleship and our worship and fellowship together is the way we water the roots of our growth, and we look forward to nurturing all that is springing up and joining in with God's plan for the future. Special thanks must go to Rosie and Anne (Churchwardens) and Margaret (Lay reader) and all those who have taken on particularly large burdens of responsibility this year. They are a brilliant team to work with.

Natalie Loveless April 2018.