

## THE BENEFICE OF ST. TIMOTHY'S AND THE VINE SHEFFIELD

### VICAR'S REPORT TO APCMS

2022

<sup>4</sup> *Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and <sup>5</sup> like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup> For it stands in scripture:*

*"See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious;  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to  
shame."*

<sup>7</sup> *To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," <sup>8</sup> and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.*

<sup>9</sup> *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*

<sup>10</sup> *Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.*

<sup>11</sup> *Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. <sup>12</sup> Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.*

-- 1 Peter, Chapter 2

It seems somewhat befitting that, at the time of my writing this, it is the evening before the official scheme that forms the united benefice of St. Timothy's and The Vine comes into effect. For me, personally, that includes a small but meaningful gesture: I can remove the adjectives "interim" and "acting" from the phrase "vicar" in the heading of this report.

It's not an empty gesture, and, to be sure, my delight in it is not actually about me and the name of my job! It helps me think about this season for our churches. The last year for us all together has felt very *interim* and *in-between*. The transition between ecclesiastical structures has been drawn-out, of course, but it's also bigger than that: We have all been in transition out of the covid season where we had become used to all sort of phases, and stages, and interim arrangements. But it's even bigger than *that*: The world at large has a sense of transition to it; there is volatility in almost every domain from the economy, to international politics to the (dis)harmony of our environment, to the deconstruction of cultural norms (including in the church). I detect, I think, an aversion to forward planning, especially amongst our younger generations: We just don't know what the next few years will hold, and we're unsure of where we're coming from, where we're going, and why. This moment in history feels very *interim*.

As Christians, we are should not be surprised by such moments. Whatever this current season is, we *feel* it, and are *moved* by it; but the grace of interim, transitional, liminal, wandering, volatile, uncertain times is that they draw us deeper still towards the one who is our rock, our centre, our defining identity. This is applicable faith: Our confidence does not rest in a stable economy, although we desire prosperity, especially for those beset by poverty. Our purpose is not grounded on a healthy environment, although we desire it as an outworking of the kingdom of God. Rather, our faith, our trust, our stable point in the midst of the storm, is, and always has been, Jesus. When the world is rocked, we *worship*. When the times are uncertain, it is our desire for God which becomes our long game. We are made free to bless and bring life, from the deep well of our worship.

Perhaps, therefore, there is something powerfully poetic or prophetic about removing the word “interim” from our current state. We need no longer be shaped by a pastoral “scheme” that is “draft”, or by looming moments in which things *might* be. We can, instead, lean into a reality which Peter’s words, in the passage quoted above, are beautiful to describe: We can trust in a deep mystery; we *are* the body of Christ. By his Spirit he has made us to be his people, and called us to himself – in our worship, in our being known by his name in the place where he has put us, and in our devoted service to him.

It is in this light, that I make this report. Our hope and our guiding sense of identity lies in knowing that we are not built on ourselves, or our strivings and fears, but on the constancy of Christ. In all that is mentioned here, there is a whiff of eternity when we are shaped by the cornerstone that is Jesus our Lord, and when what we do is done in weakness and faith; even when everything else is shifting, he is not.

So I begin this report with a prayer that I wrote for our churches at the beginning of advent.

*Glory to you, oh God, King of the Universe  
We give you thanks for your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour,  
whose name we bear and to whom we belong.  
You have led us to this time and place;  
we give you thanks for all that you have given us.  
Save us, now, from the weariness of our own self-reliance.  
Fill us with your Spirit, that we may know you better.  
Open the eyes of our heart, that we may see you, and adore you.  
Enliven our imagination, that we may long for that which only you can do.  
Awaken us, that we might know your presence  
and truly be the living and active Body of Christ.  
Made one with Jesus, we pray in his name,  
Amen.*

### **A year of change... and the blessing of people.**

The transitions of this year have included the movement of *people*. There are a number of facets to this: It has been a season of *getting to know each other again* within our own communities. It has been a season of *two parishes* getting to know each other. It has been a time in which a *ministry and administration team* have been getting to know each other. In the midst of it all has been a vicar somewhat overwhelmed by a new context... in both parishes! In and through it all, in both parishes, there has been welcome, understanding, generosity, and honesty, shared amongst and offered to many. Thank you.

At St. Tim’s, of course, the year has been marked by **Malcolm and Ruth’s** departure in June/July. I was glad to enter a context shaped and prepared by Malcolm’s wisdom, grace, and encouragement.

The year has also been marked by the arrival of **Rev. Amy Hole** as our curate. Only the most exceptional character can weather the “thrown in the deep-end” situation that Amy has faced. It is not normal for a curate’s first Sunday in a church to also be the training incumbent’s first Sunday! I am so grateful to have had someone of Amy’s depth, compassion, and capacity to learn the ropes alongside of at St. Tim’s, and as she has found her place within the flexible, organic, journey of discovery that has marked our season at The Vine. We have all been blessed by Amy’s presence; we are looking forward to her priesting, and to her further contribution to the life of the parishes.

We have also welcomed **Nick Phoenix** as our intern. He also has weathered the seas of uncertainty and has done so with the same sweet faith that we have come to admire in him. We have seen Nick at the front of church, and on **Vinelight Daily**, and of course, he was instrumental in our being able to run an **Alpha Course** this year, the fruit of which was seen, at least in part, in the baptisms on Easter Sunday at St. Bart's. Some have also been blessed by seeing Nick's ministry behind the scenes – the gentle conversations and attentive heart which connects with people who are so often overlooked by others.

There has been significant movement in the area of youth and children ministry. We are thankful for **Becki Porter**'s input into the children's ministry over recent years at St. Tim's. **Katie Smith**, together with **Rachel Widdows** and **Lucy Smith** and others have given much to allow the possibility for provision for children at St. Bart's as we emerged from the covid season. It has been wonderful to recently welcome **Esther Gratz** and her family as benefice family and children's worker. It is impossible overstate the value of **Kate Rogers-Kay**'s steady (and flexible!) presence throughout.

The embryonic House of Prayer ministry has led to the beginnings of a team with **Tim Stewart** contributing to our shared life, along with **Gill Briggs**, and **Anne Kingstone**, who has also taken a lead in helping us respond to refugees.

Within the administrative team, both **Siobhan Melville** (at St. Tim's) and **Jackie Keiran** (at The Vine) have had shifts in the focus of their work as our collaboration has increased. A significant transition at St. Tim's has occurred as our diligent finance team of **Di Marples**, **Kerrie Wells**, and **Graeme Cavill** take a rest from their labours; we are thankful to their significant contribution over many years. At The Vine **Jon Smith** has indicated that this will be his last year as treasurer; we have all been well-served by him and it is a grace that he is able to time his transition to coincide with a wider consolidation of our financial systems.

And there's more movement! At St. Bart's, the Thursday small group is transitioning towards being a coffee morning outreach, with **Tina Powell-Wiffen**, **Steve Hill**, and **Phil Townsend** picking up on the work of the **S6 Mission Audit**. The Wednesday Lunch Club had a tentative return, and we are grateful for **Hannah Saunders** who led that ministry over a significant time, and for **Stacey Renshaw** who has picked up the mantle along with a committed team.

These movements and transitions, only increase our awareness of the ongoing vibrancy and commitment that is *stable and present* at both ends of the benefice. From **administrators**, to **wardens**, and **authorised worship leaders** (of all sorts!), to those who keep the world going 'round (you know who you are!) in small ways and big ways. Thank you. If I named everybody, I'd be naming pretty much the whole church!

From an organisational perspective, I am grateful for the coming together of a weekly "staff" meeting. This has slowly but surely assisted in the coming-together of church operations. Most importantly it has helped us to simply get to know each other. There has been much patience shown, a few false starts, and a long road ahead. But we're on the path, and there is grace in that.

Above all, I am grateful for each and everyone of us who, in their own way, pursues the way of Jesus. It is that self-leadership, that example, that inspiration that brings life to a church, and inspires life in our midst. **The best contribution you can make to the life of a church**, is not to its mechanisms and meetings (although that also helps!), but simply to our shared life of worship and devotion, welling up from a heart of faith. Thank you.

### **The Basic Shape of Things**

The transitions and movement of this year has deepened my resolve that we don't slip away from making sure that the "first things are first."

There has, necessarily, been a lot of focus on changes in arrangements and operations. There will, as a matter of necessity, be more of that! For various good reasons we have needed to **consolidate IT systems**, (if you haven't been invited to "My Churchsuite" yet, ask about it!) and to begin the journey of **aligning our financial controls**. There will be more to come; we still need to implement a **Joint Council** to enable PCC oversight and decision-making to be appropriately shared where necessary. A furthering of **authorised lay leadership** is also something of a priority.

The life of a church, however, is only *supported* by such things; they do not *define* us. The vibrancy of a church community lies in the integrity and dynamism of core beliefs, passions, and purposes which *move* its members towards the pursuit of the Kingdom of God. A vibrant church can't exist as a stultified equilibrium of different agendas; it thrives when there is freedom to express, explore, and experiment with the passions, purposes, and priorities that we hold. It can be complex when there is a diversity of opinion about such things, but it is a navigable complexity. This is what I am learning as something of a guiding framework. It is a thought-in-progress, but I offer it as a musing, as fuel for conversation if nothing else:

**A benefice works best as an administrative unity  
facilitating a diversity of ministry communities.**

The "administrative unity" means that we can share, and maximise resources, and recognise and seize economies of scale. It means that as two parishes in one benefice, when we can work together and **collaborate**, we *should*. We have, for instance, already started collaborating on **elder's ministry** and **youth ministry**.

The "ministry diversity" means that across the benefice, we should expect that there will be a variety of different worshipping communities, of which a significant part are the deep riches of our existing congregational life. In each there is an opportunity to explore a shared vocation and mission. Some of the new things will exist for a season, and then come to an end. Some might develop to a point where it is right for them to "fly the nest"; we will have gifted the wider church with something good. Others will become established within us, and we will all be able to grow in the freedom of Christ together. Irrespective of the detail of it; as long as we are grounded in faith, pursuing the Kingdom of God, and yearning for Jesus as Lord to be known and glorified, we will be putting first things first.

This is already happening. Our **existing Sunday morning congregations** continuing to clarify their own sense of passion and purpose (and there will be more attention to this in due course). Other areas of ministry have had and are in a period of re-discovery after covid (such as the various **midweek activities** and the **evening service**). And there are more experimental ventures, such as **Garden Church** which has launched in and with and through St. Tim's, and **the House of Prayer** is pursuing the vision of a "sustainable worshipping community" in Uppertorpe/Netherthorpe at the "St. Stephen's end" of The Vine parish.

All in all, therefore, I am optimistic for what lies ahead. My hope is that our existing areas of ministry can be strengthened, and also that new things will emerge. There is only one exhortation, with which I remind myself before anyone else: If indeed, *a benefice works best as an administrative unity facilitating a diversity of ministry communities*, we must also remember that **administrative unity cannot produce vibrant ministry**. It can facilitate it, resource it, release it, and guide it; but such vibrancy can only come when "two or three" gather and share in a heart of worship and devotion. Neither an "Oversight Minister", or any other part of the church machine can *generate* the fruit of the Spirit; it can only tend it. Vibrancy emerges within the steps of faith of brothers and sisters worshipping, and serving together, moved and motivated by a desire for the things of God.

That exhortation is, therefore, also an invitation. Our new benefice is also a new "Mission Area". If there is something that is on your heart to pursue, I would be glad to listen to it. I would be heartened to assist those with similar hearts to meet and know each other and to share that same passion, and

pursue it together. It would be a privilege to share in your discernment of what might be.

### **The Lie of the Land in Each Parish**

I am deliberately writing the same report to both parishes; our APCM's are only a week apart. It is important that we are aware of what is going on in the life of each other. This is how we bless one another, and become aware of points of connection.

Nevertheless, each of our constituent parishes have, and will continue to have, a separate identity and integrity of their own.

### **St. Tim's**

It has been a delight to begin to learn something of the St. Tim's story and to begin to enter into it. St. Tim's has been, and is a "family" church. This not just in the sense that families are welcome (they are!) but also in the sense that the church itself has been, and is, family to many. This is a precious and profound legacy that we take with us into a new season.

In this new season St. Tim's is making a slow but steady recovery from the covid period. There are some immediate needs: We are well served by **Roger and Ellen Makin** and **Kate Rogers-Kay** and the team that leads on second Sundays; we need to add to this by increasing our lay leadership capacity. To this end, I have formed a leadership team for the morning congregation, and Amy is convening one for the evening service. We are also keen to further release the gifts of members in our midst through increased numbers of authorised lay leaders.

As you will have heard, we are also facing something of a **budgetary dilemma**. St. Tim's is a generous church, and our recent pledge day did much to reduce our budget shortfall, but it did not eliminate it. We will always be a church that relies on generosity; the budgetary stresses are real, and are likely to increase (particularly as energy contracts fall due). We are well served by **Jack Hiscock**, our treasurer. It is good to have the resource that is **Aidan Melville** as our lay vice-chair; please also be praying for the work of the fundraising committee which he is convening.

Nevertheless, these financial and other stressors are also a moment of grace. They put before us the question of our "Why?" We know what we have been, and who we are, and the strengths that we bring into our current moment. There is a danger that comes alongside this joy, however: that we will do what we have always done, simply because we have done those things before, and have done them well. We should not miss the opportunity to take a short pause to ask, and then pursue, the answer to questions such as these: "What part does St. Tim's play in the Kingdom of God? What particular vision of the Kingdom of God in Sheffield *moves us*? How might we invest in it?" By such means we will embrace a new vitality in both old things and new things. I am looking forward to our exploring these questions together.

### **The Vine**

At The Vine it is quite apparent that the church that has emerged from the covid years is markedly different from the church that entered them. We are in a different building, (in the direction that we set for ourselves before covid), and we have a significant number of new faces, even as we re-learn what it means to be a church family. Almost every part of our congregational life has been in something of a "starting again" mode.

There is joy in this moment. But there is also some grief. Covid interrupted our tentative steps towards a focused Sunday location; it became something of a jolted move. There is also a lot of grief around

past vibrancy that has now gone, and which the covid disruption has made starkly real. There is also a grief around past dreams unrealised; and past investments and plans that now feel like dead-ends.

I want to acknowledge that grief, and confess that in the midst of the last two years I have struggled to facilitate a space in which it can be necessarily and variously expressed. I would value any thoughts or wisdom about whether and how that can still happen.

There is also something of an imperative in this moment: to stay the course; to do the work of discerning who and how we are called to be as followers of Jesus right now, and to give it our best shot. In my experience it is when we turn whatever is in us – even if it is anxiety, or weariness, or uncertainty - into fuel for our prayer that we encounter something of God’s heart, and his capacity to move beyond all that we ask or imagination.

I have been heartened, therefore, by the broad direction that has been embraced by the PCC, particularly stemming from the Away Day that was held in September of 2021. You will have seen this direction of travel expressed in various ways throughout the year, but I thought it useful to summarise it here:

The PCC has resolved to the following broad course of action:

- 1) To make use of our relatively liquid capital reserves to stimulate mission and ministry across the parish. Earlier in January we began a broad brushstroke consideration of reallocating over £200K of reserves towards things such as:
  - a. Ministry positions in support of our congregational life (this has, for example, allowed us to appoint Esther Gratzke as a family and children’s worker).
  - b. Essential building works to overcome issues that are “getting in the way” (this includes dealing with subsidence issues at St. Stephen’s, and also allows for improvements in heating and lighting at St. Bart’s along with other essential amenities (such as a garden gate) in the immediate to short term.
  - c. Pursuing the viability of reordering St. Bart’s, and reimagining the asset that is St. Stephen’s as a place to locate sustainable ministry and mission in S3.
  - d. Other means of stimulating ministry and outreach in both S6 and S3.
- 2) To invest in our congregational life on a Sunday. The need for provision for children was noted in particular, and has been acted on.
- 3) To pursue the mission opportunities that attach to our location at St. Bart’s. (I am heartened that our simple presence is already blessing and offering belonging to those who live nearby.) The work of the the S6 Mission audit team recognised the opportunity of using our location as a community hub. We are beginning to make follow-on steps, with a number of us investing in coffee mornings, improvements to the garden, and so forth. There are other ideas being considered, and more are welcome!
- 4) To pursue a sustainable worshipping community in our S3 end, and, in this moment, to support the House of Prayer as a means for exploring partnerships and experimenting with a forms that can approach mission and ministry in a holistic, gentle, worshipful way, responsive to the Spirit at work around us. There is a report from the House of Prayer in The Vine’s APCM papers. I am excited by the opportunity to “breathe in” to rhythms of God’s grace, and “breathe out” in connection the many nationalities and younger generations that make up S3.

I am keenly aware that the year of transition has meant that I have not been as present within the life of The Vine as before and particularly as I have had to invest time and energy into the joys of learning about and being embraced by St. Tim's. Thankyou for your generosity and patience.

I am also aware that many at The Vine are also wrestling with the "Why?" question; it is common across all churches in this season. The danger we face, as we ponder our purpose and passion, is that we slip into disillusion, and therefore apathy and frustration. I know I can share that tendency, and my aspiration is not to counter it with Christianese hype, and a pretense that our worship and shared life is entirely as it should be (it isn't), but to use it as fuel for prayer, relinquishment, and the entrusting of all things to God. In the end, it's about him, and anything else is a burden we can't carry.

So I will end with a remembering of one of the most the heartening encouragements of this year: our time of worship together on Easter Sunday, and the baptisms and reaffirmations of baptism that took place. Among those who stood before us were some of us who have been long-term members, and have been with us since well before this season. There were some of us who have joined us more recently, having discovered us online during lockdown, or blessing us by joining us since. There were two young women, who share discipleship together in the rhythms of their school life. And there was an Iranian refugee who has blessed and been blessed by the diverse community tentatively emerging in Upperthorpe and Netherthorpe.

What a diverse and joyful representation of the range of ways in which God's grace is present to us! Some of it old. Some of it new. Some of it easily grasped. Some of it pondering and wondering. All of it grace and carrying the aroma of the Kingdom of God. In a phrase I learned a long time ago, after this Easter Sunday: "I don't know what we are, but right now, I know we're *something*."

Whatever that is, and might become, it won't be us that has done it, but whatever power and mercy is shared with us by the Spirit of God. It is grace, simply grace.