

The year that has past, since we last met as a General Vestry, has been a busy one.

But it has been, in my opinion, a year of further consolidation and growth.

We were still very much navigating a post-Covid world when I arrived, and it has taken time to see the sort of progress I know we are capable of, especially in terms of numbers attending church and getting involved in parish life.

Without any doubt, the numbers attending our Sunday services are well up but especially here in St Andrew's, on the first Sunday of the month, when the Kids' Club is operating.

I wish to pay tribute to the parents who facilitate these Sundays, and to Emma Hannigan, who co-ordinates the rota of volunteers. The involvement of children in the worship life of St Andrew's has been a real blessing and I hope that, when the Kids' Club returns after the summer break, it's activities will be expanded to include the third Sunday of the month.

It has often been said that young people are the future of the church, and to some extent this is true; but they are also the present and I want to do all I can to encourage them, and their parents, to get involved. And it may well be that we have to adapt in order to become more appealing to them: how we do church, and indeed the church in which we do church, needs to be a friendly, welcoming and user-friendly space for them.

Parents, in the times in which we live, have many and varied demands placed upon them: children need to be ferried from one activity to another and Sundays, whether we like it or not, seem to have been largely consumed by sporting activities in this part of the world.

If we are to encourage young families to make time for church, on one or two Sundays a month, we need to do everything we possibly can to assist them.

I think anyone who was here, or in St Doulagh's, on Easter Day, experienced the positive impact children make on church life. Here it was evident from the minute you approached the church porch which is still decorated by artwork from St Andrew's School.

At my first Select vestry meeting, as Rector, I stressed the importance of the relationship between Parish and School, and I am delighted to report that, in my experience, that relationship has never been better than it is at present. The entire school regularly attend services in the parish church, I am in and out of the school on a regular basis and I chair the Board of Management. It would be remiss of me if I did not acknowledge the contribution the principal, Ms Lesley McElhinney has made in making this possible.

The school will mark its 200th anniversary later this year and I will look forward to the Archbishop and Patron, Dr Michael Jackson attending a special service in St Andrew's Church on the Friday before St Andrew's Day before making a Patronal Visit to the school to talk with the staff and pupils.

As part of the school's bicentenary, plans are afoot to create an outdoor classroom in a small courtyard area which can only be accessed from inside the school, and I'm pleased the Parish will share in the cost of furnishing this area together with the local Lions Club to mark the school's special anniversary.

Easter Day saw the departure of Rodney Baldwin as Organist and Choirmaster after 45 years. It is a remarkable achievement, to be organist anywhere for that length of time and it was only right that we took the opportunity to thank him and make a presentation to him. We wish him well in whatever lies ahead.

His successor Eoin Conway will arrive on Sunday 9th June, and I look forward, very much, to working with him. Eoin is a very gifted musician, he is from Malahide, and is well-known as a singer, composer and choir director. He has been appointed to the newly created position of Director of Music as his responsibilities will not only include providing music for the Sunday morning service but creating a culture of music centred around St Andrew's Church which will, in time, be offered to the whole community in terms of occasional recitals and concerts.

It is appropriate to say something about the organ project at this juncture. The Select Vestry continues to explore with the organ builder, appointed, all options in relation to the organ. This project has taken more time than I might have originally envisaged but if anyone is to blame for that it is me!

We have looked at a number of possible replacements for the organ, none of which is perfect in terms of size or versatility, but I intend to hold out for the perfect even if it takes longer than I might like. We only get to do something like this once in a generation, and I want to be sure that those coming after us will thank us for our efforts. We are very nearly there, so please bear with us; rest assured you will be hearing more very soon: especially in terms of how you might support this worthy project.

Sometimes, when there are two churches in a union, the smaller receives less attention: though I hope no-one from St Doulagh's would be able to

say that! The numbers which attend there may well be smaller than here, but there can be no doubting their commitment to, and love for, what is truly a very special place.

Tonight, I'm delighted to be able to announce that, only yesterday, we were officially notified by the Department of Heritage that we are to receive almost €30,000 in funding to commission a Conservation Management Plan for St Doulagh's Church. This will look at the particular needs of the churchyard and field, the well and baptistry and the repair of damaged headstones in the churchyard. It will also look at repairing the church avenue and improved provision for car parking for parishioners on a Sunday. In this connection, I am very grateful for the help and enthusiasm of Ken McAllister. There is quite simply nothing he does not know about St Doulagh's Church, and probably nothing he wouldn't do for it either!

It is never a good idea to single out people and I usually resist the temptation to do it, even on an occasion such as this.... but I have in my mind people like Mary Grimes, the Parish Administrator and Alan, our caretaker, members of Select Vestry, Ruairi and Tom Delaney, those who provide and arrange flowers in both churches and those involved with the Mothers' Union and the Girls' Brigade.

Brian Brown is stepping down as Editor of the Parish Mirror after this next edition, but I am very glad to say he is happy to continue as Parish Treasurer should he be elected to Select Vestry and suitably nominated. The amount of work he undertakes, on your behalf, is immense. If, like the Parish, you have had to change bank accounts, as the result of the closure of the Ulster Bank, you will know how trying it can be. When you are a charity, as we are, you can multiply the challenge twenty-fold! I simply don't know how we

would have managed it without Brian's calm, steady approach. In addition to all of this, he chairs the Management Committee of the Parish Centre which is no easy task given the number of users we now have. Thank you Brian for all you do; you have more than earned the right to put down the Editor's pen!

Adele Notley assumed the responsibilities of Secretary of Select Vestry succeeding Nigel Warburton. She had big shoes to fill but she has taken to it all like the proverbial duck to water and, if I might say so, she possesses a rather useful ability to pull us all into line, me included, when the need arises especially when we are running over time! Thank you Adele.

Thank you to the Churchwardens for all they do on a Sunday. Their job, in both churches, has got busier and especially so here. Linda Barry takes it all in her stride, as does Stephen, and together they make a formidable team who are both friendly and helpful. John Chambers and Alan Jones, in St Doulagh's, are equally so.

You will be very glad to know I am nearly done but before I finish I want to make mention of the Flower Festival held during the year just passed. What a fantastic weekend that was. We were blessed with great weather, which always helps, and the church looked amazing as did the Parish Centre where our visitors were fed. All of this, from start to finish, was a mammoth undertaking and I think some doubted that we had it in us. There will never be another flower festival in my time – once every 200 years is quite enough thank you, but it did show what can be done when we all pull in the same direction. As I've already said, it is not usually a good idea to mention individuals but Carol Winterbotham's enthusiasm and hard work, along

with many others, saw to it that June 9-11, 2023 will be long remembered in the life of these united parishes.

Our main annual fundraiser is, of course, the Christmas Market. A number of new things happened last year, and I know more is planned for this coming November, but I wish to thank Hazel Bolton, and all involved, for what was a successful, if rather exhausting, fundraising event. The festive atmosphere was fantastic, helped by the presence of Fingal Gospel Choir, and we can look forward to more of the same this year.

I hope, when you look around you, you can see what I see and sense. There is a new energy evident in these united parishes. There are new people, there are young people, there is a commitment to Sunday worship: all of which is very encouraging and augurs well for the future.

Thank you to all of you who support me, and those who are members of the outgoing Select Vestry in particular.

I hope you know now, if you didn't before, that I am committed to both our churches and all our people – those who come and those who do not – and to the community of which we are all apart.

I am privileged to serve God and His people in this place, and I am very grateful for the support and love which you have shown not only to me, but to Tanya, since we came among you. Thank you.