

We have already heard some of the joys and challenges of 2021 and the first thing I would like to say is thank you. Thank you to each and every one who makes up this community of church we call St Edmund's and Tidmington and who has been part of this very strange journey through pandemic and which is not yet over. Some of us have more immediate visible ministries within the church but actually each of us has a calling and I am blessed by being part of this church and by each one of you.

On a personal note, there are those without whom my job would be infinitely harder, and often not as much fun. So thank you especially to wardens and ministry team, to Jill, Hannah, Alison, Mike and Nicholas who all play their part in the leading of worship; and to Stuart and Jane who have been just wonderful organists in a very weird time. Especially thank you to Hilary, who has been simply wonderful. No one expected the three years she found herself in when she took on the role of church warden! Coffee makers, readers, intercessors, cleaners, bell ringers, flower arrangers, locker-uppers, welcomers, and Drina our administrator – the list goes on. This is a good place to be.

I would like for a moment to draw out a couple of themes from our reports and from where we find ourselves, and to set out some of my vision for the future, which I hope will be developed with you.

Firstly, we are still in recovery from the pandemic. Covid was a form of national and collective trauma and it will take time to recover and restore. I am resisting the temptation to revert to everything we did before, because we are in a different place. Culture was shifting fast anyway – things have had a seismic jolt because of pandemic, and we need to reassess who we are, why we are, and where we may go.

I was pleased when we registered as an Inclusive Church last year. *"We believe in **inclusive church** – a church which **celebrates and affirms every person** and does not discriminate.*

*We will continue to challenge the church where it continues to discriminate against people on grounds of **disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity, or sexuality.***

*We believe in a Church which **welcomes and serves all people** in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ."*

It is this that I believe is at the heart of the gospel, and which is certainly at the heart of our calling. How we work that out in practice is our next task as a church.

Café Sunday is part of this – and part of our outreach into the town including the new housing. We find ourselves, in a post Christendom society, with a gulf between those who worship with us and those who have no contact at all with the church or with the stories of faith. Proclaiming the gospel afresh for each generation means finding a language and a medium which connects with others.

It also means taking risks and not being afraid when things don't work., we have stopped Little Church for now. I am sad about it, because I love it, but we clearly need to find a different way of connecting with young families. Café Sunday will, I hope, be part of that.

One of the things that has emerged with no effort on our part (don't you love it when the Holy Spirit does that?) is our connection with the fledgling Pride group. Initially they needed a safe space on cold damp evenings to meet and so we offered them the church. It was no effort really, but I have been delighted at how welcome they feel and how our relationship with a group of young people who don't normally go to church has developed. We are currently planning a service to coincide with Shipston Pride, on 17<sup>th</sup> June. God welcomes all of us and loves us. And that is essentially my sermon for that service – please do come along and support them, they have asked for a service and want, in their words, to build some bridges.

Tidmington proves regularly that small can be utterly beautiful. In a time when the rural church is in crisis in many parts, Tidmington has found its identity and its spirituality and is flourishing. The traditional morning service brings in people who don't worship anywhere else and Soul Space, a collaborative effort, is a delight. I really would encourage you to come along if you can – and it's not dark for the next few months. Half an hour of music and readings by candlelight to explore some ideas, make some space or just sit and chill. This is another, different way to connect.

We missed being connected with family, friends and communities during lockdown. Church is nothing if it is not community and friendship and fellowship. One of the things I would love to regain this year is a sense of sharing, of fun, and of the joy of simply being together. I am delighted therefore that there is a group planning a few things to help us with that – and I would be even more delighted if the spontaneous friendships and cups of coffee and other things continued and grew. If we all had a cuppa with a couple of people we don't know well this year, then that would be a great beginning, and I would also like to explore how we might have some more small groups around the parish.

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**Sarah Edmonds Maguire**  
**May 2022**