

Rector's Letter 2024

The first thing I want to say is 'thank you' for allowing me to take a much-needed sabbatical between Christmas and Low Sunday.

After almost fourteen truly exhausting years as Rector of St Marylebone, my time away was more than needed. It is only when one steps away from a really punishing post, that one can see just how much value there is in putting some space between oneself and the 'day job'.

However, the 'day job' doesn't really change during one's absence and waiting for me on my return to work in April were the resignations of some key members of the team: the Operations' Director, the Director of Heritage and Events, the Assistant Director of Music and the Director of Development, along with an audited set of Accounts for 2023 which could not be accepted as a true reflection of the parish church's finances and had to be returned to the auditors. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!

During 2023, the PCC had commissioned a review of Finances and Staffing, and I am extremely grateful to Matthew Knight (Cathedrals & Major Parish Churches Support Group), Clare Parker (Independent Audit Consultant), Chris Harris (London Diocesan Board of Finance Director of Finance and Operations) and Rachel Tustin (a member of the PCC) for helping to make several recommendations about how the parish church moves forward.

To this list of those who helped with the review, I must also add another name, that of Anthony Demby, a former Director of Finance for the Diocese of Southwark, who joined us, whilst I was away on sabbatical, as a financial consultant and who has subsequently agreed to act as the Honorary Treasurer to the PCC.

2024 will, I hope, see the implementation of many of the suggestions arising from the review, but I know that any change will be painful and costly.

I am also grateful to my colleagues Mthr Katy, Fr Stephen and Fr Robert for helping to keep things going in my absence, along with the support of the Churchwardens and Crown Sidesman.

At the 59th minute of the 11th hour, the parish church was able to agree a final financial settlement with the building contractors who had delivered the construction phase of the St Marylebone *Changing Lives*' project. Neither the contractor nor the PCC came away from the negotiations with what each wanted, but the settlement kept our disagreements out of the Court of Adjudication.

On the upside, if there is one, the National Lottery Heritage Fund has agreed to maintain their 'investment' in the project, and we are waiting to receive an additional payment of £650k from the Fund in the next few weeks. This money will, I hope, be added to what is left of the proceeds from selling Church House in Nottingham Place to purchase a flat for the assistant curate and stop the PCC from having to rent a property.

Thanks to several donors, not least Baron Paul of Marylebone, the PCC has been able to recommence works on part of the project left unfinished at the end of the *Changing Lives* project. By October, works to complete repairs to the Portico steps and pavement, replace the Church Garden steps and torchères, and repair the York Stone pavements around the building will have come to an end.

Also about to start, is a major 40-year overhaul of the Rieger Organ, and I am extremely grateful to those who have donated towards this project, not least Thomas Moore, who has become our Organ Champion.

Tom has also helped realise one of my long-term ambitions – to replace the extremely unsatisfactory post-Second World War cartouche in the reredos. It was a great joy to break my sabbatical for one Sunday to dedicate the new artwork by Sophie Hacker "*like unto a Sea of Crystal*".

There will always be work to do in a building as architecturally important as St Marylebone and I encourage everyone not only to review their weekly or monthly giving to the parish church, but to consider remembering the parish church in their will, or making a donation to support building work, the choir, our children's work, the work of our psychotherapy centre – well, the list runs on. Without your help, we can do nothing.

For a year, the parish church has been without someone to lead and deliver our vital work to our Young Church members and their families. I am pleased to say that, after several false starts, someone has now been appointed who will be an extremely worthy successor to the much-missed Matthew Butler.

Something that it is all too easy to forget in the midst of so much that goes on at St Marylebone - from primary health care to schools, via working with people living with dementia or homelessness, staging concerts and lectures (to name but a few of our activities) – that our only actual given task is to provide for the regular worship of almighty God. Everything else is, I hope, part of the way in which worship overflows from Sundays through the other days of the week, but which goes unseen by many of those who worship with us on Sunday. Huge thanks go to everyone who sustains the Monday to Friday work of this place, including to the musicians who bring so much to our worship.

A highlight of 2023 was the National Churches' Trust award ceremony in November, where St Marylebone was named the Church of the Year and Best Church Open to Visitors.

In the words of the judges:

"... we were unanimous in our support for this year's winner. It epitomises everything that a successful, sustainable and open church should be. This is a church that is working so hard to look after and further develop their building, harnesses the skill and enthusiasm of volunteers, creates a wonderful warm welcome and does simply amazing work with the local community, many of whom are struggling. It provides worship, vital services, and us a place that is rooted in its location; available to all. They have an excellent music programme, a really cool arts space and such a breadth of activities that are there for local people and also for visitors. There is a lot here that we can all learn from. We are hugely excited with our Church of the Year for 2023."

It has also been good to have been awarded the A Rocha Silver Award which acknowledges our endeavours in expressing how we, as a parish church, care for God's world. The award recognises what we do as a faith community in five key areas of our life:

- Worship and teaching
- Buildings
- Land
- Community and global engagement
- Lifestyle

Huge thanks to Fr Robert and to everyone who has helped with try to improve our environmental footprint and our care for and stewardship of God's creation. Gold Award – here we come!

St Marylebone Parish Church does not exist for itself, it exists for others, so for what you do to help others following the pattern of Christ, thank you.

Every year, I end my Rector's Letter with a challenge: that *together* we work out how we can share the love of Christ more effectively. To that challenge, this year, I add the challenge of how we can worship God more faithfully.