

ST HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON -ON-THAMES

Annual Reports
from Groups and Organisations
2025 to 2026

"We aim to worship God, to grow in faith and to share Jesus Christ, by honouring the past, while celebrating the present and growing into the future."



1. Church Council

1.1 Rector's Report

It was with great joy that I took up the post of Rector in October 2025. My induction/installation service at St Helen's was a joyful event and it was lovely to be so warmly welcomed to my new role. The autumn proved to be quite a time of transition within the ministry team, as we bid farewell to Fr Paul Smith and, at the start of November, it was my privilege to accompany Linda Hobbs to her licensing as a Lay Minister. It was wonderful to see many from the parish at that service to support Linda, and it has been wonderful to welcome her to the ministry team. I was delighted to be able to accompany Sue Pemberton, who leads St Helen's Junior Church and toddler group, to Dorchester Abbey in September as she was made a member of the Fellowship of St Birinus in honour of the service she has given to St Helen's over many years.

Services

In the period of vacancy leading up to my installation as Rector, our regular provision of Sunday services continued. The First-Sunday Eucharist appears to be growing, with more families attending regularly. We have continued to live-stream services on Zoom for those unable to attend in person. The regular pattern of services in the week – morning prayer and the Wednesday morning Eucharist – also continued throughout 2025. The 8am Book of Common Prayer Communion service continued to be held in St Helen's and St Nicolas' Church in alternating months.

I am grateful to Fr AKMA, all our honorary assistant clergy, and lay ministers for all that they do, and for their willingness to take on additional services, both during the vacancy period leading up to my installation as Rector, and in the subsequent vacancy following Fr Paul's retirement.

November saw the introduction of a new parish-wide service for All Souls' Day, held at St Helen's. This was an opportunity to reach out to those for whom we had conducted funerals during the year, and to local funeral directors, as well as to provide an opportunity for members of our congregations to gather and give thanks for loved ones who, in the words of the service, "are hidden from us by the shadow of death." I also led the Remembrance Sunday service in Abingdon for the first time. This was an extremely well-attended service, and it was an honour to be invited to stand with members of the town council while the Mayor received the salute from the parade following the service. I was also honoured to be invited to the reception in the Roysse Room after the parade, and this was a wonderful opportunity for

me to meet and talk to members of the council and others, and to start making connections.

In Advent, we introduced the revised format for the regular Sunday Eucharist (using temporary service booklets, now replaced by the professionally printed booklets). This service structure appears to be working well.

Carol services and other Christmas services were well-attended. It was good to be able to attend the start of the Christingle service to welcome those attending.

Outreach

St Helen's Easter Garden and Christmas crib in the west porch provided an opportunity to engage with passers-by, particularly families with children.

Agnostics Anonymous met throughout 2025 (excluding April, July, August, and December). Attendance continues to be good, as is the engagement from the audience in the questions session at the end of each talk. Topics in 2025 covered a wide range, from the spiritual (Prayer for Agnostics), to questions of language and theology (Is Christian language too male), to questions of ethics and morality (Does being religious make you a better person), among others. Agnostics Anonymous saw a change in personnel in 2025, as John Kerr stepped down from the panel, and we welcomed a guest speaker, Dr Bethany Solereeder, for the first time. Thanks are due to John Kerr and John Barton for the thoughtful talks both have given at Agnostics Anonymous.

Finally

As we go forward into 2026, I am grateful to the wardens and DCC for their support and hard work, to our staff, to Peter Foster, Andrew Shouler, the choir and those who provide music for Taizé services. I am also grateful to Rob Bough and the servers, to our sidespersons, sacramental assistants, flower arrangers, and all who contribute to the services in St Helen's (including by compiling rotas). Thanks are also due to the leaders of Junior Church and Quest/Senior Quest, the hospitality and events teams, and all who support our social and outreach events. I would like to express my thanks to Pat Hudson and Emmanuel Chuckwuma for their work on safeguarding and to all at St Helen's for their prayers and faithful witness in this place.

The Revd Dr Jen Brown, Team Rector

1.2 Wardens' Report

2025 was the year of vacancy, number 1 segueing into vacancy number 2. It was with great joy and relief that David and I heard that Jen had accepted the offer of the post of Rector of Abingdon-on-Thames and we were delighted to see her inducted and installed in October. Shortly afterwards, Father Paul announced his retirement and we knew that we would be back into a vacancy! At least we had the Parish Profile ready and prepared. (At the time of writing, things are well under way for the Team Vicar post to be advertised, interviews to follow in June.)

Looking back at 2025, I'd like to say a big thank you to all those who helped to make the Rector vacancy go so smoothly - to our clergy, both regular and honorary, to Geoff Meen for chairing the DCC and Gwen Bevington for her continued work as DCC secretary, to our Administrator Jackie who held the fort in the office and to caretaker Robin: both had to adapt to 'the boss' not being so readily to hand.

Despite being in vacancy we managed to press ahead with improving our safeguarding thanks to the gentle and encouraging work of Pat Hudson. We continued to feed the body through hospitality and the mind with Faith Forum, Agnostics Anonymous and Akma's Lenten talks. The Events group fed our coffers by running quite a few concerts and other events like the Heritage weekend. These occasions made money for the church and brought people into the building. Congregation numbers remained good throughout 2025 and by Christmas we had welcomed quite a few newcomers to our church and town.

Another area of growth over 2025 has been the number of Church and Centre bookings. We now have two regular Centre bookings: Yellow Submarine (a charity which helps young people with autism) meets on Tuesdays and a Life Drawing class on Thursdays. We also hosted services or visits from Caldecott, Abingdon, the Manor, Abingdon Prep and St Helen and St Katharine's schools, along with the Abingdon concert band, ADMS, the Abingdon Music Centre, the British Legion, the Knights' Templars and the Mayor-making. Our own Events group ran a Barn Dance, three other concerts, organised activities for the Heritage weekend and assisted with the Christmas market. Groups from St. Edmund's Church, the Kennington History Society and the Oxford branch of the U3A all enjoyed guided tours of the church.

Much of what we do depends on the willingness and commitment of volunteers. A number of people who have served in various roles for many years stepped down in 2025 and I would like to record a vote of thanks to Susan Scott for her work with hospitality, Mary Anderson for chairing the Friends of St Helens (FoSH), and

Liz Norman for running the flower arrangers. We also saw Linda Hobbs, who had already served the church so well as warden, move into new pathways with her licensing as a Lay Minister last November. We look forward to her ministry among us. There are areas of church life where more help is needed, acting as sidesmen, running and helping with FoSH, helping with events to name but a few. If you could offer some time and assistance, please let David or me know.

The wardens of the three churches have continued to meet regularly to share thoughts and concerns and we hope that as we move forward as a Team Ministry our congregations, too, will welcome the opportunity to get to know our sister churches better.

The size of this report is evidence of the plethora of activities going on across the church, of which we can be proud. A big thank you is owed to so many people who help in so many ways, both on Sundays and throughout the week, in maintaining a worshipping and welcoming community, serving the people of Abingdon. Two people I feel bound to mention whose contribution is not seen by many: Steve Thomas who keeps a constant eye on the fabric and maintenance of both the church and the Centre building (not to mention stewarding when he has a spare hour!) Thanks are also due to Jeanette, his very patient wife, who may not see as much of him as she would like!

Susan Read has been our Church Treasurer now for many years, and she and her team of helpers put in many hours of work checking our accounts and alerting us to how we are doing in breaking even or not. They have recently made their base in the small, upstairs room in the Centre. We couldn't do without them!

Margaret Horton, David Pope

1.3 St Helen's Church and Centre Fabric Report

The 5-yearly periodic inspection of the electrical installations in the church and Parish Centre went ahead in 2025. The main issue is degradation of some of the Mineral Insulated Copper Clad lighting cables in the church. There is a long history of roof leaks in several locations in the church. This has caused corrosion of the copper where the cables have been in contact with damp lime plaster. This has allowed water to penetrate the cables, resulting in low insulation resistance and consequent failure of the electrical tests. Regular cleaning of the church roof and gutters has reduced the occurrences of leaks, but the risk can never be eliminated completely, given the complexity of the roof structure. The MICC cables will all be

replaced as part of the installation of a new lighting system. The new cables will be polymer-sheathed and resistant to damp.

There had been a problem with the reliability of the Parish Centre fire alarm system, with regular false alarms and high maintenance costs. A new alarm system has been installed, along with new smoke and heat sensors.

The fluorescent light fittings in the Bell Ringing Chamber have been replaced with new LED battens. There was the complication of access to the Chamber as the spiral staircase is very narrow. The contractor was able to find a scaffolding tower in a narrow format with short vertical sections which fitted up the staircase.

There was a repetition of the church roof leak near the organ, as reported last year. There had been a temporary repair at the time with acrylic sealant, but subsequent movement of the lead had opened up a crack in the sealant and the leak returned. The sealant has been replaced with a permanent lead repair patch.

Stephen Thomas, Fabric Officer

1.4 House for Duty

The House for Duty Parish property, 2 Musson Close continues to be occupied by Revd Dr. AKMA Adams and his wife Dr. Margaret Adams. The house was purchased in 2015. The property, a 4 bedroom Town House is within walking distance of the three Parish churches. The current License to occupy will continue until the end of AKMA's current appointment with the Diocese.

Since last reported no repairs have been required, the Gas Safety certificate, a legal requirement, was renewed in February, all repair and maintenance costs for repairs being met from Parish funds, as agreed under the License to Occupy. Since occupation by Revd Dr. Adams repairs have been minimal, but it is anticipated expenditure will be required when vacated, with necessary redecoration and maintenance. The property continues to be managed by Linda Hobbs.

Linda Hobbs

1.5 Heat pump research project

If you recall, we started with an idea – is it possible to use a heat pump not only to heat St Helen's Church but also, via a small district heating scheme, to heat the

surrounding heritage buildings and potentially the Parish Centre and Rectory?

This is not a short-term project though we are aware of the need to reduce the carbon footprint to 'net-zero' by 2035 at the latest, as requested by the Diocese.

We have not made much progress in the last twelve months but we have ruled out various possibilities. The use of river water for a water-based heat pump looks problematic particularly as neither the church nor the Christ's Hospital charity has any rights to river frontage. Other possible solutions exist and we hope to explore those in the next twelve months.

If interested and you have skills to contribute to a project of this kind, do talk to us.

Rob Rutherford

1.6 Music

This year has been one of welcomes and farewells in the choir. We have said goodbye to some faithful members who have given countless years of musical service, most notably Norman and Elizabeth Dawson, but we have also been delighted to welcome a good number of new faces to the choir, including some very talented young choristers. Saying farewell to Norman and Elizabeth brought home exactly how much they had contributed to the day-to-day running of the choir, and I am very grateful to choir members who have stepped up to take on some of these essential tasks such as managing the choir library, robes and safeguarding.

St. Helen's choir is open to all who wish to join; new members are not expected to pass a voice trial or similar. Choir members rehearse once a week on Friday evenings, plus a few extra rehearsals at busy times like Christmas and Eastertide. As well as singing at our regular Eucharist on Sunday mornings, the choir sings choral evensong once a month on the third Sunday; evensong congregations are small but appreciative of this jewel in the crown of Anglican choral worship.

Advent, Christmas and Epiphany are one long busy period in the choir's life, represented by three very different carol services. The Advent carol service is largely a reflective affair, focusing on waiting and including some very deep texts, set to ancient chants. The Christmas carol service follows a well-loved pattern and mixes the musical evergreens without which Christmas would not be Christmas with enough new items to keep people coming back. This year's carol service was attended by record numbers. St. Helen's is distinctive in the way we do our Epiphany

carol service, with the focus very strongly on families and food, following a short, punchy service. I need to express my own thanks to the choir members for the time and effort they put into preparing and offering sung worship which consists of the best we can give. I would particularly like to thank our assistant organist Andrew Shouler for his accomplished and skilful playing, and Norman Gee, who handles liaison with Harrison and Harrison, the organ builders, who keep our very fine instrument in excellent condition.

If anyone is interested in joining the choir, or is the parent of a child who is interested in joining the choir, please come and talk to me about what is involved. We are always very happy to welcome new members of all ages, and being part of a choir that sings together in the praise of God is an honour and a delight.

Peter Foster

1.7 Our Church Accounts Team

There are lots of people doing various jobs to help the members of our District Church Council (DCC) know how we are doing financially and make better decisions on behalf of our Church. Here are a few of those involved:

Our Administrator and Wardens organise our bookings and invoices for the rent. Our Stewardship Co-Ordinator, Jeff Dale, keeps records of all the pledged income, and claims Gift Aid from HMRC twice a year. Julie Mellows organises our banking team, who once a week collect all the money from the collection and wall safes. They count the money, summarise it, and pay in the money at the Post Office. The church Events team organises fund raising events which improve our finances. Many congregation members are reimbursed by our finance team. Alex Titcombe and Geoff Meen are responsible for our contactless machines. Kate Burland kindly runs the church payroll for our five part-time employees. Our Assistant Treasurer, Ann Murdoch, enters all the summaries, bank transactions, expenses claims, invoices, etc. into the accounting system, and helps me to do all the financial things needed for our Church including reporting on our accounts quarterly to the DCC.

As Church Treasurer, I would like to thank all those mentioned above and many whom I may have unintentionally omitted. I'd also like to encourage anyone who has experience of working in an accounts setting and can spare a little time to let us know so we can share out the tasks involved. There's always room for one more and it is more enjoyable working together.

Susan Read, Church Treasurer, treasurer@sthelens-abingdon.org.uk

1.8 Electoral Roll

2025 was a year for creating a completely new Electoral Roll after five years of annual revisions. As expected, this resulted in a significant drop in numbers compared with the 2024 revised roll. The final new Electoral Roll for St Helen's for the year to April 2025 was 146 (2024: 229), with 8 people who had not been on the roll previously, and 91 people removed, reflecting the usual pattern of a new roll year where only those returning a form are added back onto the Roll.

In 2026 we return to a simple revision, and work is progressing well. The revised St Helen's Electoral Roll will be available for inspection between 10th and 24th April 2026 and will then be merged with the rolls for St Nicolas and St Michael's to form the new parish Electoral Roll in time for reporting at the APCM.

I am hopeful that some who did not rejoin last year may choose to come back onto the Roll this year, and we are also blessed with new faces and families now attending St Helen's who may wish to join it. For these reasons, I am optimistic that our 2026 numbers will show an encouraging increase.

Kate Burland

1.9 Events Group

The Events Group continued to thrive and learn, working to refine its 'back office' systems (publicity, programmes, ticketing, finance, health & safety, data protection, and management of the building). We aimed to put on a varied programme to encourage the town to come to St. Helen's and to support our own church community, all with an eye to raising funds both for St. Helen's and for charity. We are fortunate to have varied talents and useful skills/experience within the team. We are indebted to Kath Cook who stepped down as Chair in July. Kath helped us to harness our creative ideas, keeping us focused on delivering our projects. We are delighted that Anne Dodd has joined the group and we are benefiting from her experience, particularly in relation to Heritage weekend.

We started our programme with a barn dance in February which not only attracted members from our own church communities but also, on wider advertising, we saw attendees outside of our own regular community. Fun was had by all and we learnt about what was needed to add a meal to our offering.

We then followed up with the Young Organists & Helenstowe concert in April, another creative project by our Director of Music, Peter Foster. We continue to be

indebted to Peter for his support. We deliberately wanted to put on another organ concert to showcase our historic Harrison and Harrison organ. A selection of music was performed by young organists from the Abingdon and Oxford areas, interspersed with seasonal choral items. It was wonderful to see such passion in the young people who came to perform supported by the talented Helenstowe consort.

We had two concerts planned for June and October and unfortunately for reasons outside of our control these concerts were cancelled. Fortunately, this allowed us to accept an offer from Sally Mears to perform Haydn's Creation at the end of October which was also performed to support our new Rector, Jen Brown's inauguration. An enormous amount of work was carried out behind the scenes to support such a large orchestra and we were very grateful to a catering team from the Catholic church who put on the performer teas free of charge.

Heritage weekend in September was another great success. On the Saturday we welcomed over 700 people from the town to St. Helen's. Anne Dodd's connections with the organising committee were invaluable and our profile was raised on the main Abingdon Heritage weekend website. We received feedback that our bell tower tours and the 'try the organ' sessions were well received. A lot of work went into creating quizzes to signpost the history of the church all supported by our delicious catering. We were pleased to provide a warm welcome to the town and we are starting our planning for this year this month.

In November, we welcomed The Oxford Waits, who performed 17th Century readings, dance tunes and songs on period instruments. They incorporated a bit of local Abingdon history into their repertoire which delighted the audience. This event attracted a younger cohort of people from the town, who very much appreciated the folk music, the period costumes and the ballad history.

In 2025 we raised £2,172.24 for the four events Barn Dance, Young Organists, Creation and Waits, plus £590.27 for St Helen's from our share of Heritage weekend takings, totalling £2,762.51. For charities, we helped to raise a respectable total of £1,255.63: £710.02 for Macmillan Cancer (£590.27 plus their claimable gift aid of £119.75) £545.61 for Sally Mears' Freetown, Sierra Leone charity to help build a school there.

This means our events generated £4,018.14 in all for St Helen's and other charities after costs. In terms of attendee numbers, turnout was respectable: 76 *Barn Dance*, 75 *Young Organists*, 93 *Creation*, 59 *Oxford Waits*. *The average attendee numbers for our classical concerts was 85.*

2. Children's and Youth Ministry

Work with children and young people at St Helen's consists of church-based activities on a Sunday, Baby & Toddler Group on Mondays, and other ad hoc activities. There is a working group on children's and youth ministry, established by the DCC in 2024, which met roughly every other month in the first half of 2025, and somewhat less frequently in the second half of the year, as new initiatives bedded in. Our ministry to children and young people grew throughout 2025, although it must be noted that additional leaders are needed to support both Junior Church and Quest.

First-Sunday service

The first-Sunday, all-age Eucharist was re-launched on Epiphany Sunday 2025. Unfortunately, no children were present at that service, but the new format, with a more informal style of sermon and simplified eucharistic prayer, was well-received. Over the course of the year, the service has grown and by the end of 2025 there were several families attending regularly. The children of the congregation have gradually been getting used to coming to the front to take part in the sermon. Younger members of the congregation generally do the readings and lead prayers at this service, and when possible, junior servers also take part in the service.

Junior Church

Junior Church is offered most Sundays except for first Sundays when children take part in the church service. Junior Church presents the Ministry of the Word through story, play, craft and activities using the Roots ecumenical material as a starting point. It has been very encouraging to see more families attending church during the past year. Some children prefer to stay in church with their families, but there have been fewer Sundays with no Junior Church due to no children being present.

The Junior Church leaders are Sue Pemberton and Alison Oliver. At least two adults are needed for each session and we currently have no regular helpers but rely on accompanying parents or ad hoc help from a small pool of qualified people. If Junior Church is to continue and grow the team needs to be expanded, any volunteers would of course be appointed in accordance with Diocesan Safer Recruitment rules.

Quest

Quest members leave church after the Gospel and meet in the upstairs room in the church centre for discussion and activities on all but the first Sunday of the month.

Numbers have been small – sometimes only one – but there are signs of numbers picking up, partly because of youngsters joining the choir. Thanks must go to the leaders (Martin Kimber, Margaret Horton and Rob Rutherford) and also to our second adults (Barbara King, Georgina Jarvis and Elizabeth Irving). Thanks are also due to Elizabeth and Norman Dawson who played a significant role but have now moved North. We continue to use the resources produced by the ecumenical group “Roots” as the basis of our ideas but we will frequently adapt the materials or follow our own ideas based on the lectionary. The feedback we give at the end of the service will give you some idea of the variety.

Senior Quest

Senior Quest has continued to meet just once a month, on the last Sunday. We lost a couple of members to university in 2025 but it's always lovely to welcome them back during the vacations. A number of the older Quest members have been given the option of attending Quest or Senior Quest on the last Sunday of the month. We have continued to discuss many different topics including ethical issues, the Christian angle on current matters, ideas from the lectionary readings etc. In 2025, it was good to get our young people's input into the parish profile and Emily acted as an excellent guide on Team Rector interview day.

We lost our regular 'second adult' when Jacob Smart moved away so a number of people have stepped in to fill this role, – a big thank you to them.

Baby and Toddler Group

On Monday mornings during school terms, the Baby and Toddler group welcomes children from babies to those in their final year before full-time school. We are in contact with over thirty families, although most weeks the attendance averages 15+ with a parent, grandparent, or carer.

We continue to use both inside and outside space throughout the year, which is valued by the children. We offer a simple craft or “exploring” activity each week, and each session ends with about fifteen minutes of singing and action songs.

The link with St Helen and St Katharine School continues as part of the sixth-formers' community service. Two sixth-formers came every week in the last academic year and this year one comes. Older children particularly enjoy their company and will often choose to play with them.

The Baby and Toddler Group is for any family in the community but the links with the church are clear. Families are invited to events that might interest them, our craft activities often reflect the Christian year, and at Christmas our last session includes a very simple telling of the Christmas story. We light candles during Aven and learn one or two Christmas carols. Last Holy Week, we used a Monday morning in the middle of the Easter holidays to hold a simple Easter craft activity morning, and several families with older children came, as well as some other families.

The volunteers who help with the group are Sue Pemberton, Sue Cox, Jenny Shouler, and Rosalind Rutherford. Elizabeth Dawson also volunteered regularly until December when she moved away. We also want to record our thanks to Robin Day who works hard to keep the area around the Parish Centre clean and tidy and as safe as possible.

Youth Ministry

In a very small way, a ministry for the teenagers of the parish (primarily drawn from St Helen's) began in September 2025. A social evening was held when those still at school could chat with some of our older youth who have already headed off to university, to get a sense of what it is like to transition from school to university. It was also a chance for the young people to socialise together, something for which they do not have the opportunity in church services. The feedback from the evening was very positive, and further youth social evenings are due in 2026.

Jen Brown, Sue Pemberton, Rob Rutherford, Margaret Horton, Rosalind Rutherford.

3. The Wider Church

3.1 Church Twinning

Church Twinning is a subgroup of the Church in Abingdon, a local ecumenical partnership. formed in 1988 and bound together in a formal contract. Thirteen churches of all denominations are members of the fellowship.

Church Twinning is itself affiliated to Abingdon and District Town Twinning Society (ADTTS), which was formed in 1956 with the support of the Town Council to foster friendships and engender reciprocal visits between families, schools, clubs and societies of Abingdon's twin towns.

In June 2025 we hosted visitors from Sint Niklaas, Argentan and Schongau. The detailed report of this visit appeared in the CiA Newsletter and Candle in the Wind.

A small group travelled from Abingdon to Argentan in early October and another small group was invited to Sint Niklaas later in the same month.

Our intention was to host another Bouree dance in the autumn, following a very successful dance in November '24. Sadly, this had to be postponed as our French friends were unable to confirm a date.

It was agreed to hold an English Barn Dance at the Conduit Centre in February '26. This was to be a fund-raiser to help pay the expenses of future exchange visits.

The style of the visits is that the committee plans the weekend itinerary and themselves, together with church members, host the visitors. In this way we learn how each other lives and many lasting friendships are made.

If you are interested in this type of inter-continental visit please do get in touch with your church representatives, named at the end of this report.

Anne Dodd and Elizabeth Simpson

3.2 Agnostics Anonymous

The discussion group Agnostics Anonymous continued to meet throughout 2025. We kept to the same format of a 20-30 minute talk from one of the panel followed by a short break and then a question and answer session. We start at 6pm and aim to finish by 7.15pm, as often individuals want to ask their own questions of Panel members at the end. (In 2026 we are meeting every two months, on the 4th Tuesday of Jan, March, May, July (?), Sept, Nov.)

Topics in 2025 included:

“Is Christian language too male?” Led by Rev. John Barton
“Does being religious make you a better person?” Led by Rev. Jen Brown

“Prayer for Agnostics” Led by Rev. John Kerr

“Believing, behaving, belonging; which is the heart of Christianity?” Led by Rev. John Barton

“Can Christianity combat the extinction crisis?” Led by Rev. Jen Brown

“Why would a good God create through evolution’s violence and waste?” Led by Dr. Bethany Sollereeder

“Why do Christians bother with the Old Testament?” Led by Rev. John Barton

“Can you believe in both science and the Bible?” Led by Rev. Jen Brown.

After the June meeting, Rev. John Kerr retired from the panel. We thank him very

much for his contributions both as leader and panel member over a couple of years. Since then we have not had a permanent new panel member but guest lecturers have given talks on a couple of occasions.

I would also like to thank Jill Gant who has recently had to take a more backward role, but was instrumental in getting the idea of an open discussion group about aspects of Christianity off the ground.

Attendance has steadied at about 40 to 50 at each meeting. Most attendees are regulars but every time we get a few who are new comers and sometimes not regular church goers. We have picked up quite a few from neighbouring villages and sometimes visitors from further afield.

The aim is still to show that Christianity is open to question and it is “all right” to have doubts; there is always room for questioning and for deepening understanding. If you haven’t attended a session so far, do give it a try.

Margaret Horton

4. Church groups and organisations

4.1 Handbell Group Activities

In 2025 our team had twelve members, enough for all the events at which we were asked to perform. We held ten weekly practices starting on 13th October. We again met in the Parish Centre each Sunday evening. We provide background music at church Christmas fairs and entertain at clubs, carol services and care homes. I would like to thank all the handbell ringers again this year for their helpfulness and for the fun we have had.

Susan Read, Handbell Group Leader

4.2 Tower Bell Ringers

The bells are rung every Sunday morning at St Helen’s and St Nicolas’, while Tuesday evening practices alternate at the two towers. On Friday afternoons we welcome boys from Abingdon School for their practice. This is followed by our own session, mainly for teaching youngsters.

As part of the Oxon Ringing School (along with Dorchester-on-Thames and

Kirtlington), adults are taught basic bell handling on Saturday mornings. This is possible with the generous help of volunteer experienced teachers from a wide area of Oxfordshire.

In 2025 we organised two Association of Ringing Teachers (ART) day courses to train new teachers of bell ringing. Quite a few new teachers attend the Ringing School to be mentored and gain experience in order to achieve accreditation. Last year we rang for the occasional wedding and tolled for some funerals.

Visitors are very welcome to come up the tower to see the bells and ringing. We are happy to teach girls and boys (from age 10) who may be interested in learning to handle a bell and join in.

Brian Read, Tower Captain

4.3 Holy Dusters

Eleven loyal people have remained as Holy Dusters for the past year. Recruitment of new volunteers to the team has been difficult, although a couple of people have expressed interest and have contributed to the work of the team. The extra assistance of the whole team of Holy Dusters is invaluable to the caretaker, who still works restricted hours and cannot therefore complete a comprehensive weekly cleaning programme by himself.

Chris Jefferis

4.4 Archives

The church holds an archive of national significance with some records dating from the 16th century. The archive is maintained by a small team that is also responsible for responding to requests for information from the public. The requests are largely from amateur genealogists seeking information about family members and come from across the world; last year we had visitors from Australia, for example. Heritage Day is always a highlight and the 19th century tithe maps attracted considerable public interest last year. The church possesses three tithe maps, which show property ownership across the town in the 1840s. However, the maps are deteriorating in quality, and a programme of repair is currently underway. In addition, the largest of the maps has been digitized and will be made generally available.

As advertised in a recent church newsletter, we need a new archivist to carry forward

the wonderful work of Anne Smithson. The team is also currently investigating whether some of the records should be transferred to the County Records Office; this is the usual practice for most churches.

Geoff Meen

4.5 Friends of St Helen's

Since our 2025 AGM last July, FoSH has had a quiet year. Since I resigned in the Autumn we have been seeking a new manager to report to the trustees, who are the Rector (ex officio), the wardens and Rob Bough.

An interesting point to note is the success of our 2025 'Pancakes and Kings' Shrove Tuesday event. Kate Burland reported that 58 people attended that evening: 35 were members (eight renewed their membership), eight new members joined (three couples and two individuals), 15 were non-members.

That evening we raised £110 from membership payments / donations and £312 from pancakes and drinks. It was an incredibly enjoyable double-bill, including a fascinating, well-researched talk by Anne Dodd. This was made possible by the hard work of ten people who made and served the pancakes, set up, and then cleared up, which all goes to show how much fun we can have whilst learning, eating, and raising money together.

I can thoroughly recommend the role of FoSH manager. If you are reading this and wonder how to become involved in St Helen's, please contact the Rector or one of the wardens, or email me on mary.fulani@gmail.com for an initial chat.

We are very grateful to Kate Burland for managing the FoSH accounts, and to Susan Read, our St Helen's treasurer, for her constant support and help. We thank Sue Mathew for her continuing management of the shop in church, which is now run by the DCC rather than FoSH.

FoSH receives annual income of approximately £10,000 from interest, dividends, and membership subscriptions. FoSH and the linked charity, the Trust for the Development of St Helen's, continue to support the church in diverse ways.

Mary Anderson

4.6 Mothers' Union

We now have 22 members. Over the year we have had interesting talks starting with Rev Canon Helen Kendrick, Rector of DAMASCUS parish on her *Ministry and Motherhood*. We also welcomed Ann Dodd on the *History of Abingdon*, an informative talk on *Keystone Mental Health & Wellbeing* based in the Abingdon Precinct and Norman Dawson spoke about the history and work of the London Livery Companies. In October we enjoyed Armchair Exercises and in November a talk on the Oxford Breast Buddies, a charity to support all undergoing Breast Cancer.

In December we held our Advent Meeting with Readings and Carols. We had the sad task of saying 'goodbye' to Elizabeth Dawson as she and Norman were leaving Abingdon to move nearer to their daughter. We presented her with a book and garden vouchers.

During the year we held two services – in September, Eucharist in St Nicolas' Church and in November a service for Rise Up against Domestic Abuse.

We continue to send knitted cardigans for babies, toiletries and children's toys to Baby Basics based in Milton Keynes. At Christmas time we knit small Christmas stockings for Children Seen and Heard and provide cakes for their Christmas Party. At Easter we knit chicks which are then filled with small eggs and in the summer we baked and provided lots of cakes for their summer party held at Hill End.

We sent toiletries to Ronald MacDonald. We also provided Christmas cards for Bullingdon Prison.

2026 will celebrate 150 years since Mothers' Union, founded in the small parish church of Old Alresford, Hampshire, by Mary Sumner, a vicar's wife with a bold vision. She believed that women, regardless of class or status, could come together in faith to support one another and strengthen family life within the Church.

From that single spark of an idea, a global movement was born – and Mothers' Union has grown to 4 million members across 84 countries. As we look to the future our members will continue working to improve the lives of individuals, families, and communities around the world. At the heart of everything we do will remain our unwavering belief that faith and compassion can transform lives. The 150th Anniversary of the Mothers' Union will be celebrated in June at St Paul's Cathedral, London and in August at Evensong in Oxford Cathedral.

We have had a full and diverse year of talks and activities and anticipate 2026 will prove equally interesting.

The 150th Anniversary of the Mothers' Union will be celebrated in June at St Paul's Cathedral, London and in August at Evensong in Oxford Cathedral. We always welcome visitors to our meetings.

Gillian Watson

4.7 Readers and intercessors

The readers and intercessors rota has worked well over the past year, with a good team of people who, week by week, contribute to the Liturgy of the Word in a prayerful and well executed manner. We are grateful to those who step in at short notice to cover for illness or other events. We are fortunate this year to have had several new volunteers. Notes for new members of the rota and well-established members have been prepared as an aide memoire for practicalities associated with the role.

Alexandra Green and Susan Worthington

4.8 Open Churches Stewarding

Our summer season 2025 began at Easter and ended at Michaelmas. We cannot say how many visitors came through the church doors in those six months but we do know there was a constant stream of people from far and wide and for many different reasons; making our church building a place of pilgrimage, of historical interest, as a sacred space and a quiet refuge.

Our ability to welcome our visitors was sadly handicapped this year. We had just ten regular stewards and two of these could help only in alternate weeks. This resulted in some mornings having no stewarding presence. Safeguarding regulations oblige us to have two stewards in the building at all times.

It does make visitors feel welcome if they find they are not alone in the building; they are greeted with a cheery smile; there is someone to have a word with; or who can answer questions. We should not underestimate the value of stewards, whose presence is solely to greet visitors. Therefore a big thank you goes out to those who faithfully gave their time throughout last summer.

Finally, an appeal to all who read this: if you feel this is a small service that you can give to further the work of the church's outreach to the community, please get in touch with me.

Elizabeth Simpson simpsonem123@gmail.com

4.9 Sidespeople

We welcomed Steve Fisher and Kate Burland who joined our group this year. A flurry of newly printed service sheets have kept our wits about us (especially when some of the Lent/Advent booklets had their covers on upside down). Continued thanks to everybody who helps either frequently or just on special occasions.

As coordinator I (Martin) maintain and email out a booklet of guidance and useful information for the whole group, with details of fire safety rules, contact details and the regular rotas. Instead of relying on paper based sign-up sheets for special services, I have made the bold move (after about 16 years of running the team, which is lightning fast from the perspective of the C of E) of creating a Google Docs online spreadsheet where I lay out the rota and team members can record which services they could help at, or any planned absences. Do contact Martin even if you can only help occasionally and I would give you the necessary training, plus access to this online artefact.

Martin Kimber

4.10 Pastoral care

During the long interregnum (the combined absences of Fr Charles and Fr Paul), pastoral care in Abingdon Parish has proceeded on an as-needed basis. The sheer amount of visiting and caring that our volunteers, lay ministers, and clergy have undertaken has seen us through this period of under-staffing, though a fuller complement of ministers (lay and ordained) would stand us in good stead.

For obvious reasons, we can't catalogue the specific activities of team members, but the pastoral care team has dealt with parish needs both physical and spiritual, offering prayers, visiting, accompanying, helping with household needs, and other supporting services. We know that much helping takes place among friends on an informal basis, too, and we give abundant thanks for that. The clergy particularly thank the pastoral team for carrying so great a load for the past year and a half.

We have already begun to take first steps toward organising the team across the whole parish, and expect to call a full committee meeting shortly before Easter. In the meantime, as always, if you have a pastoral need — or are aware of another's need — please get in touch with Fr AKMA, or Linda Hobbs, or the Parish Administrator who will direct your concern to an appropriate team member.

Fr. AKMA

4.11 Outreach activities through the West Porch

In 2025 we continued our recent tradition of displaying the church crib and Easter Garden in the West Porch of St Helen's church in the days leading up to Christmas and Holy Week respectively. Sue Pemberton took responsibility for setting up both the crib and the Easter Garden, and we also offered simple crafts or activities for children to do at home, and Easter eggs in Holy Week. A rota of volunteers greeted passers by, inviting them to services and chatting to those who wanted to stop and talk. It is this rota of volunteers who make it possible to do this.

Rosalind Rutherford

4.12 Strategic planning group - lighting

The lighting project team held an on site consultation with the DAC in April 2025, when the DAC lighting advisor was present, and wrote a definitive report on her view of the lighting scheme. The main focus of the report was on the position of drivers, to ensure adequate provisions was made for their positioning and possible replacements in future year. This was supposed to be followed by the lighting consultant drawing up special wiring diagrams, showing the location and type of drivers, controls and distribution boxes, plus corresponding lighting calculations.

Unfortunately, the lighting engineer assigned to this task left suddenly in June 2025, and there was no further communication with the lighting consultants' firm until December 2025. When communication did resume, the architect advised the project team to consider selecting another lighting consultant, with the architect assisting in the procurement process.

The team also held an informal meeting with a representative from Lowe and Oliver (L&O), to sound out the feasibility of L&O helping to develop the lighting project.

Since the start of 2026, the project team has been considering the advice from L&O and deciding what instructions to give to the architect, via a Zoom meeting fixed for the middle of March. The scope of the overall project has been extended to include painting and decoration of the church to take advantage of the economy of scale, with scaffolding being used both for this and installation of the new lighting scheme.

The project team has now moved into the realm of considering project management for the remainder of the project, and has had discussions with our Quinquennial Architects, West Waddy, to help with taking this forward.

The project has reached the stage of discussing with our current architects the task of procuring a new electrical consultant to draw up the technical details required for the lighting plan, to be used for a submission to the DAC for a faculty, and to provide tender documents to be used when selecting an electrical contractor to do the actual installation. As these stages are being completed, the fund-raising and design and production teams will meet to plan fund-raising and publicity to make the project attractive to the local community and beyond.

Chris Jefferis

4.13 Hospitality

Hospitality in the form of food and drinks, has always been an important part of the life of St Helen's, from post service refreshments to newcomer's lunches. There is a small core of volunteers who help as and when they can. Both the Hospitality and Sunday coffee teams would benefit from a few more helpers.

There was one newcomer's lunch during the year, mulled wine was offered after the Advent Carol Service, and the group organised the Epiphany tea.

I resigned as co-ordinator after 20 years' service in January, principally because I was aware I could no longer pull my weight as I used to. It has been a pleasure to have supported the church over the year.

Susan Scott

4.14 Flower arrangers

Members of the Flower Group create beautiful arrangements for the platform, the Lady Chapel and the porch week by week, with additional arrangements for Easter, Christmas, Harvest and other important occasions in the church's year. Liaison is made with wedding couples as required. Liz Norman stood down as the group leader in January, and a team of Alexandra Green, Julie Mellows, and Catherine Kimber have taken over Liz's roles. We are grateful to Liz for all her work for the Flower Group, and are pleased that she is happy to carry on as an arranger.

The group meets three or four times a year to discuss future plans, and we are fortunate to have welcomed new members this year. Currently a key concern has been the sustainability and environmental impact of having flowers in church, issues such as air miles with imported flowers and the environmental impact of oasis.

We are grateful to members of the congregation and the parish family who contribute to the cost of poinsettias at Christmas and lilies at Easter.

Alexandra Green has become a member of the Church of England Flower Arrangers' Association, which will be a source of advice and inspiration.

Alexandra Green

4.15 Food Banks

Abingdon Food Bank, under the management of Trussel Trust, is a UK-based anti-poverty charity operating over 1,400 food banks, which aim to provide emergency food, practical help and advice.

Our local Food Banks provide an important lifeline for many families in need within our community.

The two Food Banks in Abingdon open on different days, so allowing access to emergency food throughout the week. The Christchurch hub operates on a Tuesday and Friday morning, with Preston Road open Wednesday afternoons.

Since the pandemic there has been an ever increasing demand for support. Changes in benefits payments and the rise in food costs have had a negative impact on food poverty within the area.

Christmas saw Food Bank users given parcels of Christmas foods in addition to regular food parcels. Our Food Banks also provide additional food to families with children in school holidays to assist when school dinners are not available.

The Parish of Abingdon continues to actively support the work of our local Food Banks. With regular donations taken from churches each month, we are able to offer additional donations at Harvest Festival and Christmas. Many parishioners privately donate and support the work through monthly Direct Debits.

As a "Church Family" we must continue to support this important and vital outreach in our community, and give thanks to all who contribute in any way, both locally and nationally. Staff, volunteers and of course "clients" appreciate the support given at a time when everyone is facing increased demands on their resources.

Linda Hobbs