

## New Year Pastoral Letter: 01 January 2025



### **Re-dedication for a New Year: looking backwards to look forwards**

01 January in the church's calendar is the feast of the Naming and Circumcision of Christ. What is in focus with this festival and its timing is a call to re-dedication. Jesus' circumcision is the moment of his incorporation into the Abrahamic covenant and so his Jewish heritage. His naming with the name "Jesus", points us to Jesus' life purpose and message in its meaning: "The Lord saves". These acts remind us of how we are each named: in Christ, we are made new; there is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5.17).

It is helpful to look back over the last year to see what re-dedication might mean for us at St Lawrence's at the start of 2025. I had a number of ambitions for 2024 which seemed uncomplicated, but which would be visible: to complete the process of renewing the parish's branding, to have the Cooper crucifix re-hung, to put in place a new software platform to simplify and bring together communications, stewardship, rotas and room hire with a user-friendly interface. It has been disappointing and frustrating not to be able deliver these but there are good reasons why, as will become apparent in what follows.

The PCC had already supported the idea of appointing an Operations Manager but the scope of the post meant that a long recruitment process was anticipated. Finally, a group met with a task to help deliver the last step of the Interim Process, decisions about St Lawrence's future. By undertaking a paper exercise to agree a role specification and Job Description for a next incumbent, I hoped that representative members of the congregation would achieve clarity on the commitment needed by parishioners. A shared understanding of priorities, the resource available and commitment from members of the congregation will be key to determining what the next phase of St Lawrence's life looks like and so what an incumbent post might be expected to deliver.

## **Challenge and loss in 2024**

In the early months of 2024, two tragic personal events had a devastating impact on those immediately affected by them. At the start of April, only a few months after her diagnosis, Chris Edwards died of Motor Neurone Disease. Chris left behind Gerry and Jack, all three being much loved members of our community. Chris had a strong profile as a leader and organiser, at home as well as in leadership roles in the Co-Op and as school governor. It is hard to imagine how Gerry and Jack must have been affected by Chris' death. Jenny's daughter Sophie was diagnosed as having a blood cancer and required chemotherapy for this, even whilst she carried her pregnancy to term. With another close relative having died of a blood cancer Jenny's concern was heightened.

My thoughts remain very much with Gerry, Jack and with Jenny, Sophie and now Jenny's grandson, Sonny, as they process these losses and grieve. These events and their outworking have also affected parish life.

Chris was the parish's Safeguarding Officer. Much of her time in 2023 had been spent in meetings with Diocesan officials addressing a complex parish concern. With Chris stepping back from this role, a new parish safeguarding officer needed to be identified. I am delighted to have had Silje Ommundsen take on this responsibility. Silje brings to it her continuing experience working in safeguarding at a Local Authority level. This means that her work in the parish is informed by her professional practice. I also welcome this commitment from a younger member of St Lawrence's who is relatively new to the church community. Once the administrative process of appointment was complete, Silje and I met regularly to bring her up to speed on a church based safeguarding role, and to update the parish's policy framework.

Jenny asked for five months of unpaid compassionate leave from May 2024 to allow her to support her daughter and (soon-to-be-born) Sonny. Chemotherapy is an exhausting as a treatment without the additional emotional impact of the diagnosis. Whilst the thought of paying an agency for temporary administrative support was floated, employing someone on a short-term basis was a much preferable option for continuity, quality of service and value for money.

## **Challenge leading to growth**

The process of formulating a Job Description and Person Specification for an interim Parish Administrator was started with a view to advertising. The timing of the post seemed likely to restrict the pool of applicants. The other factor that needed to be addressed were the office systems. Over the years, these have become idiosyncratic with limited transparency arising from IT arrangements. In advance of Jenny's replacement being appointed, I needed to renew the office systems and train Jenny in these changes. This was time consuming but has provided for much needed business continuity and greater clarity in the parishes administrative processes, both in-house and for external users.

Darren's prior experience was from industry rather than in the third sector. He interviewed well and communicated enthusiasm, an attention to detail and a disposition to listen attentively. Darren's appointment was a great success. He has shown aptitude to the work and has been energised by the investment of time and energy in the new office systems.

Ultimately Darren's orientation to Site Maintenance, to Health and Safety and improving the effectiveness of the parish's room hire meant that he was strongly placed to take on an Operations Manager role on an interim basis. Darren has worked to support Jenny's return to the new office systems and he now line manages Jenny. Since his appointment, it has been possible to follow through on the PCC's decision to appoint a contractor to provide for continuing site maintenance. Care of a two-acre site has long proven too great a burden for a volunteer team, despite the commitment and resilience of a core group. The PCC gave a steer that grass mowing should remain in the hands of our range of volunteers.

Renewal of the office systems, Darren's appointment as interim Operations Manager and Silje taking on the role of Safeguarding officer are all examples of growth that has come through facing challenges. The continuing problem of a lack of capacity in the PCC and the absence of Churchwardens has led to Judith piloting a scheme in which sidespeople have 'acted up' into the Deputy Churchwarden role. The need to support visiting priests during my sabbatical provided the impetus to train Dickson Murage and Phil Howe in an MC role. The Master of Ceremonies (MC) supports liturgical worship in setting up and clearing away, a role a variety of people supporting our Sunday 0800 service have grown into as well (including Mary Thomas and Chris Barham). Taking on responsibility in this way and growing in confidence in it is an important achievement in 2024 and one that we should celebrate and be proud of.

There are two other areas of continued growth. Eleanor Maxwell co-ordinated delivery of the May and Christmas Fairs, the latter also drawing on the leadership of Gwenllian Leach, Joanne Bursford and Jen Smith. I have been impressed by how Eleanor has looked to learn from her experience to date and her planning for future Fairs. Sarah Taylor, Sam Bradbury and Katharine Strinic have continued to lead the parish's offer for children. With support from the Revd Anna Dias, they sustained through the autumn our Family Celebrations resourced through Messy Church. They have also thoughtfully reflected on how best use is made of the capacity available for Sunday morning groups. Fr Dioynisius has also made a valuable contribution to the parish. I will be writing under a separate cover about this.

### **Looking backward to look forwards**

2023 was the 90<sup>th</sup> year of St Lawrence's dedication as a church. It was not possible to achieve a large event to celebrate this in 2023 year, so arrangements were deferred into 2024. The parish has now passed the 91<sup>st</sup> year in which it has had a dedicated church. Joanne Bursford has pioneered an initiative to document parishioners' historic stories of

the parish, starting with an interview with Joyce Boot. This is a great heritage project. The interview will be available shortly.

My immediate priorities for 2025 are twofold: the first task is to play my part to complete the parish's Interim Process by supporting the PCC to agree their priorities for St Lawrence's future and to communicate these to the congregation. Appointment of an incumbent needs to arise from this clarity being offered by the church community. The next step to happen is for the PCC to receive and comment on the material produced by the working group. Second, there are a range of tasks from last year, listed at the start of this letter, which need to be delivered. There are two further areas for attention: to help newer members of St Lawrence's to become established as part of the church community and for us to revisit Stewardship and Giving.

With regards Stewardship and Giving, for St Lawrence's to be able to offer ministry, it relies very much on the time, talents and financial giving of members of the congregation. Every member of the congregation will find a range of ways to contribute to church life through their talents; many enjoy the reward of doing this in a defined and recognised ministry. Do speak to Fr John or one of the deputy Churchwardens if you would like to explore how your talents might best be employed to serve others. The principle of tithing is that 10% of a Christian's net income is given to charity. For those operating this principle, our ask as a parish is that congregation members consider giving up to 5% of their income to St Lawrence's to help maintain current parish provision. Live projects include completing payment for the church renovation works; achieving greater accessibility to the church and safer entry / egress from the hall (for wheelchair users and others who use walking aids); replacing the toilets in the hall which are currently in a very poor state; and covering the costs described above of maintaining the site.

Information about regular giving may be found on the parish website here:  
<https://www.st-lawrence-eastcote.org.uk/giving>

Helpful documentation to support a process of thinking through the place of sharing time, talents and money as part of Christian discipleship may be found under the 2022 Stewardship Campaign, which can be found here: <https://www.st-lawrence-eastcote.org.uk/howtofindourdocuments>

I hope we can all be encouraged by the energy and commitment members of the congregation are bringing to St Lawrence's with a view to building relationships and community. Whilst that commitment is rewarding it also has a cost, but it arises from a genuine understanding of the value of what is on offer in the parish's life. For me at least, our common life is a witness to Jesus' name: "The Lord saves".

Fr. John  
—