

Annual Parochial Church Report 2025

Introduction: Kevin Bright

Our Parish has been in vacancy since July 2024, following the retirement of Rev Anne Le Bas. Her leaving service and the final act of worship she led were on 7 July 2024. The service was very well attended by the community and followed by food, drink and music to which many contributed. We were very fortunate to have Anne as our priest together with all the contributions from her husband Philip.

Since then, the Parochial Church Council has been running the church, although final responsibility rests with the Area Dean of Sevenoaks, currently Rev Tim Edwards.

We await an update from the Diocese on the way forward regarding ordained ministry for our church and hope to have some news on this in the next couple of months.

Day to day matters are dealt with by a team of 6 who form a 'Standing Committee'.

Among many new things to learn it has been interesting to get to grips with the Churchyard Regulations and all the various forms which must be completed and permissions required for different aspects of this. It has been our privilege to serve the church and wider community to the best of our ability when the time comes to lay their loved ones to rest.

With the support of visiting clergy, we have been delighted to continue with baptisms and have more planned over future months.

The commitment to making our church an inclusive and welcoming place where all can be themselves is clear for all to see.

The overriding message is that we have been able to sustain ourselves over the last 10 months thanks to the hard work and commitment of many people who love our church and wider community.

Worship & Ministry: Kevin Bright

Since Rev Anne Le Bas' retirement, we must source a visiting priest to take a service of Holy Communion each week. Rachel Wigley has done great work to secure cover for most Sundays.

Where this is not possible, we must seek the bishop's permission not to provide a Eucharistic Service and this is then replaced with a Service of the Word, usually led by our Reader, Kevin Bright. Whilst we have enjoyed an array of interesting visiting priests, none have provided as much help as Rev Adie McCall, to whom we are extremely grateful.

Even though our Sunday worship has become a little less predictable, our congregation has adapted, enjoyed the variety, and numbers in church remain healthy on Sunday mornings.

Babs Bartholomew and Wivine Turner have the bishop's permission to lead a number of services and have provided regular All Age Worship which have been greatly enjoyed.

Our **evening services** attract faithful, but very small congregations and we are extremely grateful to Sally Medcraft for leading this and ensuring that it will be there for a future priest to build upon.

Friday morning prayer is led in rotation by those in attendance and is a haven of tranquillity. All are very welcome to come along at 9am.

Major services are still clearly important to those outside the regular weekly congregation and 100+ people attended our Remembrance and Christmas services with All Souls and Easter also enjoying strong attendance.

Alison Bull has been **taking communion by extension to residents at Lavender Fields** on a regular basis where she leads worship and prayer.

As we reflect on the past year, we wish to express our deepest gratitude to Margaret, Helen, Georgina, and Sally for their wonderful service as our **sides people**. Sunday after Sunday, they have warmly welcomed every person through our doors with kindness and joy, helping to create a true sense of belonging in our church family. Their faithful commitment—ensuring hymn books and service sheets are prepared, and everything is tidied after each service—has been a quiet but vital ministry that keeps our worship running smoothly.

Maggie has taken back up the role of ensuring that our frontal and other altar and pulpit coverings are changed with the various seasons of our church year, and carefully cleaned and stored. The enthusiasm and care shown by all those helping behind the scenes have blessed our church in countless ways, including refreshments after morning services, which volunteers cover by rota. We are truly thankful for their generous hearts and willing hands, and we look forward to another year of serving together.

Music: in the absence of a Choir Director, the choir has continued to enjoy making music together over the last year, with grateful thanks going to Emily and Abbey, who have been leading mostly fortnightly practices. The choir have turned out and robed for all Eucharist and special services and are singing the communion hymn during the interregnum, which is so valued. No applications or indications of interest have yet been forthcoming for our **choir director vacancy** since Philip Le Bas left last July, and the role continues to be hopefully advertised.

We have two remaining **organists** whose playing is thoroughly enjoyed by the congregation, with regular rounds of applause inspired, to whom we extend our gratitude. **The music group**, Emily and Martin, lift All Age Worship services beautifully with their musical accompaniment, and downloaded music through a speaker serves when neither they nor an organist can support services.

The **bellringers** continue to meet for practices, inviting new members (as does the choir), and their contribution to services is much appreciated.

Servers and Sacristans:

Our warm thanks go to Kevin Bright, Maggie Fox, Jenny Elliott, and Sue Buddin, who set up the front of church and serve in worship. Their help is quiet, often unseen, and absolutely invaluable. This is proving especially important in helping our visiting priests attending to lead communion services, arranged so effectively by Rachel, to whom we also offer sincere thanks.

All Age Worship Initiatives: Wivine Turner & Babs Bartholomew

During the past months, the All-Age Worship (AAW) team has made significant strides in fostering continuity of our inclusive worship environment at St. Peter 's and St. Paul's. In the absence of a vicar, we have embraced this opportunity to engage and empower our congregation, aiming to ensure a space where everyone feels welcome.

Key Achievements:

- **Successful Services:** We have successfully delivered **All Age Worship services** during this period of interregnum, showcasing our commitment to maintaining a vibrant worship life.
- **Collaborative Approach:** We have seen active participation from all age groups, allowing everyone to take part in activities during the services. This collaborative approach encourages children, youth, and adults to play active roles, including planning and leading intercessions, delivering readings, and engaging in creative worship activities.
- **Inclusive Worship Practices:** We have determined to incorporate diverse styles of worship into our AAW services, hopefully appealing to different spiritual needs, ensuring that everyone can connect with God in a way that resonates with them. There is, naturally, still much room for development here, but risk-taking to trial leading approaches such as St Ignatian reflective meditation, has been positively supported and fed back upon by our dedicated congregation, who have kept up numbers in attendance of these services.
- **Community Engagement:** The congregation has responded positively, with increased involvement in service planning and execution. We have actively listened to feedback, trying to amend practice, which has been instrumental in ensuring inclusivity and strengthening our sense of community and belonging during this transitional period.

Michael Richards has regularly led our prayers and also facilitated prayers led by our younger church members, for which we are so grateful.

We are grateful for the support and enthusiasm shown by our congregation. Your willingness to embrace change and participate in these services has been vital in maintaining a vibrant worship life at St. Peter and St. Paul.

As we move forward, let us continue to cultivate an inclusive atmosphere where everyone can contribute and grow in their faith, aligned with our Inclusive Church registration and theological ethos. Together, we are building a dynamic worship experience that we pray reflects the inclusivity of our community.

The Good Book Club: meets regularly on a monthly basis (Wednesday morning) in the church hall, led by Lise Michaelides and Gesiena van Setten with a healthy active attendance, for group scripture study and prayer. All are very welcome to come along.

Lent group: was held this year one evening each week in the church hall, led by Kevin, following the theme of Living Hope. This was accompanied by very moving and reflective music. Our grateful thanks to Kevin for his preparation here.

PCC: Babs Bartholomew:

The PCC has met regularly through the year either on Zoom or in the church hall, supported by email discussions, as items have arisen. We have continued to discuss all the usual issues like finance and maintenance, as well as naturally to focus on safeguarding and all aspects of the interregnum, including our Parish Profile. This is in early draft form, with a range of committee members involved in its creation.

Unfortunately, we still have no churchwardens, and no one offering to fill this important role, but our subcommittee teams are very strong and we are covering all actions necessary.

The PCC is a friendly group of people, who bring a wide range of experience and knowledge. If you would like to join the PCC, you would be made most welcome; there are a two vacancies to be filled.

Parish Safeguarding 2025: Marshall Kent

Safeguarding is fundamental to the health of our Church and to our Faith. We can't claim to love and welcome all people unless we are ready to do what we need to keep them safe.

The appointed Parish Safeguarding Officer PSO Marshall Kent and the PCC take their safeguarding responsibilities seriously. Together they strive to create and maintain Seal Church as a place that is safer for all, that promotes well-being, that prevents abuse, and that creates nurturing, caring conditions within our Church for children, young people and vulnerable adults.

The PCC continues to strengthen and review these Church environments and activities. This is done by training, support, communication, learning, governance and quality assurance processes:

- The PCC has signed up to the House of Bishops Safeguarding Policy for children, young people & adults and follows its guidelines in the way we run our activities.
- We have links on our website, and information in the porch for anyone who needs to raise a concern.
- Safeguarding is a standing item on every PCC agenda.
- All relevant persons are currently DBS checked / cleared.
- We use the Church of England Parish Safeguarding Dashboard, which provides an audit of our parish practice and provides directions for compliance and mitigating areas of Safeguarding risk.
- The Dashboard converts into a 'Promoting a Safer Church' action plan in place that sets out, in line with national and local priorities, how the policy is being put into action at Seal and is reviewed regularly by the PCC.
- The PCC and Church Officers undertake Safeguarding training at the appropriate level for the activities and roles they undertake.

The PSO and PCC are focused on continuing to maintain the high standards and compliance achieved in Safeguarding practice and delivery at Seal while the Church is without a Vicar.

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Anyone can do the Basic and Foundation level safeguarding training, which is online, by going to <https://safeguardingtraining.cofeportal.org/>

The more people who are informed about safeguarding the better.

Latest versions of the Church of England's Safeguarding documents can be found here:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding>

School Links: Marion Gilchrist

We have a team of 5 who ensure a very warm welcome to the children, school staff and families of our local parish CE Primary School into the church for their special services. These occur for Harvest, Christmas, Easter and Leavers' services, so 10 in all each year. As Seal School is now so large, the services are split into key stage groups. The last Messy Church (Good Friday in church) welcomed some of these families for the first time due to the informal chats with parents at these services.

We also go into school every 3 weeks and lead assemblies. Those we have covered so far are: Christingle, Candlemass, Fairtrade, Parable of The Mustard Tree, Generosity and Christian Aid Week.

We are thoroughly enjoying this connection and will continue with this until we have a new incumbent.

Thanks go to those who are part of this group- Jenni Pascoe, Jill Myers, Barbara Barker, Kelly Durrant and Marion Gilchrist.

Messy Church: Helen Davies

Messy Church has been continued since our interregnum started, with regular meetings on the 3rd Sunday afternoon of each month for 1 1/2 hours, which include four or five fun craft activities utilising a range of media and techniques, relating to a scriptural theme for that season and part of the lectionary's year, drawn upon in an informal short story. We have some actioned prayers and prayer incorporating children's and parents' ideas, focusing particularly on blessings during the last week/month. Songs associated with the theme and/or selected by attendees are signed and sung, with some musical instrument accompaniment. To close, we share cakes, biscuits and soft drinks, with a hot drink offered to adults. We use Makaton signing where appropriate and embrace a fully inclusive philosophy. Although numbers are presently small, two new families are attending regularly, which is very welcome.

On Good Friday, we're continuing with the historic Messy Church offering, with a wider range of crafts, including an outdoor activity and a visit by live Easter chicks, and storying, prayers and songs up in the choir stalls, as well as Hot Cross buns and hot chocolate. This is fully accessible for all, and this year attracted a very good number of families, including many who are not usually church attenders, especially helped by personal invitation of the school visiting team.

The sessions are planned and led by Helen, with the support of a small team of volunteers, with thanks due to Helen, Mike, Jenni, Rosemary, Wivine and Babs.

Our dearest hope is for growing numbers of families to attend monthly, with publicity of our events gradually increasing, including through church displays and social media of our sessions.

Home Groups:

Thursday Morning House Group: Marion Gilchrist

This group meets every Thursday morning during term time between 10am and midday (sometimes beyond - dependent on how chatty everybody is). We have 15 regular members and meet either at Kelly's house or Marion's.

The group started with just 4 members some 9 years ago and the time of day and days of the week changed frequently, until we found a time that met all of our needs. The daytime meetings suit those that are not working, and those older members of the congregation that don't want evening meetings. We meet weekly because we mostly remember to come that way!

We generally follow set studies such as Life Builders, but have also put our own together based on topics which members have requested. This year we followed a 24 week study of Acts of the Apostles, followed Paula Gooder's Ladies of Advent and for Lent, her Ladies of Holy Week.

One of our members sends us daily reflections, and we use our WhatsApp group for prayer for ourselves, families and friends as well as our church.

Tuesday Evening House Group: Babs Bartholomew:

This group has historically been small, providing for those largely who work during office hours. We have had a few members come and go, including when moving out of the area, as well as to a curacy, and currently are mainly only two-strong! Much of our recent bible study time has been spent in deepening our Lectionary scriptures understanding, in order to plan and lead All Age Worship services once a month (having been certified by the Bishop of Rochester to deliver such services, without a sermon or eucharist, naturally, following training under our ex-priest's tutelage, there having been scriptural and pastoral discernment elements, with our early leadership being observed). Wivine throws her home open for these meetings with warm hospitality.

We have also utilised support from Life Builders, as well as BRF resources, including Fiona Stratta's interactive Bible meditations and online sources. We would warmly welcome new members to join us for meetings focusing on other scripture, in addition to our AAW scriptures preparation.

Talking Village & Know Your Neighbours:

Know your Neighbours and Talking Village continue to thrive, with a rota to share the hosting of weekly Monday afternoon sessions at Deniz, the village café, and once monthly free refreshments in the library on first Saturday morning of each month in Seal library (in school term times), with new people getting involved and new ideas being put forward for village activities. Marion Gilchrist's weekly community email is much valued as a way of linking people together locally.

Sevenoaks for Families is still running, now under the umbrella of Compassion in the Sevenoaks Area, providing family mentorship and active listening support to families in crisis, with the four volunteer mentors all being members of our Seal church congregation. Sue Buddin provides free active listening/pastoral care support workshops to our church (and other Sevenoaks churches). Marion acts as our **pastoral care** lead in exceptional circumstances, with an extension to provide communion licence for such visits.

Church Events Team: Treasured traditional events went ahead during the year, with Sue's Tea for Two, Maggie's Open Garden, Chris and Maggie's Christmas wreathes workshop and table sales after key seasonal services. These events are not only community engaging and fun, but raise funds for the Church, which is greatly appreciated. Thanks go to Rosemary Pattullo for her support in global awareness-raising and charity fundraising within the church, through Christian Aid.

Church Cleaning Rota: Marion Gilchrist:

The church is cleaned each week by partnered volunteers:

Week 1 - Heather and Roger Alwen

Week 2 - Sally Bright and Fern Tink

Week 3 - Barbara Barker and Marion Gilchrist

Week 4 - Jenni Pascoe and Wendy Whyte

Week 5 - Sally Thompson and Marion Gilchrist

Much thanks go to this team who through their dedication, saves our church much in the way of funds, which would have to be paid to employed cleaners as many other churches have to fund.

There is a routine of cleaning tasks and everybody covers other areas which they see require doing. This year, they have been additionally responsible for clearing and reorganising several areas of the church which have needed addressing, including the Children's Chapel resources. Only environmentally-friendly cleaning products, fulfilling LOAF criteria (Local, Organic, Animal-Friendly and Fairtrade) and refilled at EcoPantry, Seal Chart, are utilised in church and hall, in line with our registration as an Eco Church.

We are currently reviewing how to keep the Church Hall cleaned for outside users. We only have Friday Group as regular users, presently, who tidy up after themselves, but the general overall clean is being picked up by the above group - especially Sally. Therefore, we would really appreciate some further volunteers so we have capacity to look after the hall as well.

Please see Marion if you are able to offer your help here.

Fabric & Ornaments Report: Paul Thompson

Clock: the clock has been removed and repaired, and was replaced in January. Unfortunately it has stopped twice since, and Gillett & Johnston have undertaken minor adjustments. It is hoped that it will now remain trouble free.

Lightning Conductor: the lightning conductor system has been upgraded to meet current requirements, which also involved improvements to the electrical system.

Masonry: the repairs identified in the 2022 Quinquennial Report have been completed. There are no outstanding items from that Report needing attention, presently.

Roof: regular inspections are undertaken and necessary repairs completed. The turret drain is cleared regularly, although adverse weather has caused some short term problems.

Path lights: these have been upgraded, with new sensors fitted.

Eco Church Report: Babs Bartholomew

Events: a range of events have taken place, from a May '24 Big Seeds for Bees Take-Away churchyard session to daily 2025 Lent challenges displayed in Church and Lent and Easter Eco walks; from Churches Count on Nature & Climate Coalition's "Great Big Green Week" week long churchyard survey in June '24 and RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch

and Big Butterfly Counts last Summer, to a Creation Care focus service in September, as well as churchyard, hall and vicarage gardens “working bees”. We also held a treasure hunt, pollinator, amphibian and reptile information and creative stall in the churchyard during the 2024 Seal Garden Safari.

Projects: a particular focus this Spring and Summer, is to promote increased range and numbers of pollinator-friendly indigenous flowers, with some specific planting in the Wildlife Area, in response to proven declines in our churchyard insect numbers.

Our animal habitats within this area are thriving, and it has been a joy to hear tales of juvenile Slowworms from children and their parents checking under our reptile mats!

Our new double Cycle Rack with integrated planter was positioned in the churchyard late last Summer, and has been flowering beautifully, with herbs growing too for multisensory enjoyment this Summer, as well as to promote cycling, with the security provided. We hope to see lots of visiting cyclists utilising the rack during this year’s “Ride and Stride”.

Environmental issues continue to be closely considered when planning for all fabric and maintenance projects, and are a constant agenda item for our PCC meetings.

NB. We have scaled down 2024-2025 Eco Church actions and events, due to the necessary focus on Interregnum arrangements. We very much look forward to upscaling our programme of events again when a new incumbent is in post, when we aspire to gain our Bronze Eco Church award.

Financial Report: Andrew Sindall:

Annual accounts for the year ended 31st December 2024:

Income: total incoming resources for the year were £70,568 (2023: £81,069) as shown in the financial statements. Voluntary income from donations, including planned giving and the associated Gift Aid recovery, amounted to £58,302. This compares to £69,435 in 2023 although this included over £20,000 raised for the restoration of the clock and the church fabric, the work for which was carried out at the end of 2024.

Fees for weddings and funerals were £5,413 (2023: £6,887) and other income (hall hire and investment income) were £6,853, an increase of £2,106 over the previous year.

Expenditure: normal expenditure on running and maintaining the church increased to £58,066 (2023: £50,739). This included £24,000 (2023: £22,000) paid to the Diocese in respect of the parish share following the change in approach adopted last year. Furthermore, the year’s expenses also included £8,865 in connection with repairs to the clock and £3,689 on stonemasonry work to the church building. Further expenditure totalling £8,186 has been made early in 2025 in connection with completing the clock repairs, repairing the lightning conductor and associated electrical upgrades, and further repairs to the clocktower floor. All of these works are covered by the 2023 special appeal or from the Church Repair Fund.

Other expenditure for funeral expenses and security rose slightly from £3,078 to £4,024.

Overall position: the result for the year was an excess of income over expenditure of £8,479 compared to an excess of £27,253 in 2023. As noted above, last year's excess was principally due to the appeal in 2023, the payments for which are accounted for in 2024 and 2025.

The total fund balances carried forward at 31 December 2024 were £127,027 (2023: £118,548). This includes £16,090 in the Church Repair Fund which is retained towards meeting the cost of repairs to the fabric of the church, including costs arising from the Quinquennial inspection. During the year the costs of stonemasonry work on the church (£3,689) was drawn from this fund. The last Quinquennial inspection was carried out in July 2022 and the Fabric Team believes the fund is sufficient to cover any works identified in this report. No further work arising from this report are anticipated.

Included in the total fund balances are £23,123 (2023: £24,662) of funds the PCC holds in two bank accounts in the name of Friends of Seal Church. These accounts are restricted for use on special projects such as major items of expenditure on the fabric of the church that are not covered by funds held in the Church Repair Fund.

The COIF investments (including the Bastone endowment of £56,235) are stated at their original cost of £60,234 (2023: £60,234). The valuation of these investments at 31 December 2024 was £122,248. No funds have been withdrawn from the COIF investments during the year. Interest and dividends received from these funds are paid into the PCC current account and used to fund the day-to-day activities of the church.

In the interests of simplifying the churches finances, two CBOF accounts were closed in the year, the balances being transferred to the deposit account.

Looking forward:

The PCC has prepared a budget for 2025 which indicates that income will exceed expenditure by a sum of around £3,500. Without an incumbent since July 2024, and likely to extend well into 2025, fees from weddings and funerals are anticipated to be down. The Church Hall has recently lost its last regular hirer and any income will therefore be small. The budget has considered all expenses and, where necessary, has increased them for the effects of inflation. It also takes account of the remaining costs of £8,136 (net of VAT as these costs fall within the Listed Places of Worship Scheme) in connection with the repairs to the clock, the lightening conductor and the clocktower.

In the light of this modest surplus, the PCC has agreed to keep the parish share contribution to the Diocese at £2,000 per month, the same as in 2024. This figure will be reviewed regularly and may be adjusted during the year if circumstances change and suggest this is necessary. Furthermore, the PCC will continue to exercise close control over its expenses (it recently changed electricity suppliers to take advantage of a 2 year

fixed deal), whilst ensuring any opportunities to increase its income are fully explored. Improvements to the Church Hall are being considered to enhance its prospects to be let.

It is worth saying that the church receives no direct financial support from the Government and therefore all its annual running costs and any capital expenditure must be met from its own resources. We are deeply grateful to all those who give regularly to the church to ensure these costs are covered and that it maintains its vital place in the Seal community. Increasing donations in line with inflation is always particularly welcome.

At the end of 2023 we introduced the Parish Giving Scheme (PGS) to provide a simpler way for people to make donations to the church. The process is very easy to set up and donations can be made monthly, quarterly or annually. Funds are passed to us within a few days of being collected by PGS. In addition to the donation, any eligible Gift Aid is automatically collected from HMRC and sent to us, thereby saving the Finance team valuable time. Since its introduction, 25 members have joined the scheme and the church is undoubtedly benefitting from it. We would encourage everyone making regular donations to the church to use this scheme if they are not already doing so.

I was appointed the church's Treasurer in November 2024, since when I have been gradually getting up to speed. I am most grateful to the other members of the Finance team, Alison and Simon Bull, Paul Thompson, Wivine Mutombo Turner, Stuart Wigley and Mark Turner, for guiding me through this process and for all their hard work in maintaining the church's finances in good order over the past year.

These accounts will be independently examined by Andrew Michaelides FCA. The PCC would like to express its thanks to him for carrying out this work.

Electoral Roll 2025: our electoral roll reregistration came up for renewal (due every 6 years) this May, with Wivine and Simon investing much time and support to us all, here, to make this happen. We are indebted to them for their hard work here. The roll number will be discussed at our Annual Parochial Church meeting on the 18th May '25.

APCM Meeting : 18th May '25 11.15am, St P&P's Church.