

**Parochial Church Council Meeting
Monday 10 March 2025 18:30-20.45 Congregational Life
Congregational Report**

A well-attended meeting (one of two every year on Congregational Life – the others are four quarterly business meetings) saw a number of important issues discussed.

First, we were joined by a member of our congregation Steven Overman (a communications professional for 25 years) who had been asked to facilitate the Congregational Communications Task to Finish Group's project during the Season of Listening. The members of this Group are: The Revd Dr Ayla Lepine, Claire Wright, Derrie Shurville, Tracy McKeever, Anna Auchter, and Steven Overman. The Focus Groups were all members of the congregation, who met for the purpose of exploring, understanding, and offering recommendations regarding communications at St James's. These conversations – two in-person on Sunday 20 October 2024, two online over the following two days – were transcribed. Participants were assured, during recruitment as well as at the front and back end of the focus groups, that these discussions were confidential and that all input would be anonymised. The report demonstrates that conversations were open, honest, and authentic, and included some frank and clear constructive criticism, which is a sign of people's trust in the process. The document is the result of a nuanced approach to preserving insights while honouring our promise of anonymity.

Regarding the Focus Group's members, Steven explained, *"We intentionally recruited some of our newest congregation members and some of our most longstanding members, people of various ages, genders, communities, backgrounds and nationalities. But the resulting document is not a forma report, nor strategically interpreted (yet), nor a to-do list. It is the voice of a broad range of members of our congregation."*

The PCC greatly appreciated this insight as valuable not least because the contributions were clearly honest and thoughtful, motivating, challenging as well as validating for St James's as a whole. There were comments on PCC communications, the newsletter, website, ChurchSuite, Wren Project, external fundraising and development, finances and money, the clergy, congregation intercommunication and "who we are?" The next steps are a workshop, and further feedback to the congregation with an action plan to ensure that the lessons of this valuable exercise are acted on.

Our Rector Lucy Winkett then presented a paper on staffing challenges, in the light of our COO Nick Thasarathar being unavoidably away from work for up to 4 months at an important time. A plan was proposed and the PCC confirmed that some reserves should be called on if necessary in this decisive year for the Wren Project.

There was discussion about the Report from the Archdeacon on his Visitation to St James's. This is a demanding experience, especially for the church wardens, PCC secretary, Head Verger and clergy in which we have to show records on births, deaths, memorials, our ledgers, where and how our valuable plate, chalices etc are stored, showing the minutes book of all our meetings, details of our insurance, policies, practices and procedures as well as our estates and maintenance etc. There is much more - but you get the idea that it is a thorough examination of everything about us! It happens every three years and is conducted by the Archdeacon of London, the Venerable Luke Miller. There were some small issues of compliance with requirements which have now been addressed but the Archdeacon has commended St James's and our work. The PCC were pleased with the outcome of the Visitation and that SJP was given a clean bill of health. One comment was that the Archdeacon referred to what we are doing on the Wren Project as "exemplary", especially the risk registers.

The PCC then received a report on the Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging survey at St James's which took place during September and October 2024. The EDI and Belonging Survey Coordinating Group are: Tchansia Kone, Audrey Sebatindira, Petra Griffiths, Claire Wright, and The Revd Dr Ayla Lepine. The report demonstrates a series of findings which help St James's to learn more about itself and about who we are as a congregation, parish, and wider community. The previous survey took place in 2021 and was presented to the congregation at the APCM in May 2022. By the same token there will be a presentation on the latest report at our upcoming APCM on 18 May, including the graphs and statistics that were gathered. Although the organising group had expressed some disappointment at the response rate, which was about 50% lower than in 2021, it was explained that there may be a number of reasons why this was so in comparison with the earlier survey.

It was recognised that this is an important tool in assessing what people's experiences of community, belonging (and sometimes not feeling a sense of belonging) at St James's. Regarding inclusivity, respondents stated that they valued being part of a diverse church where they felt a sense of genuine welcome and hospitality, whether in the building or online, amongst those who attend regularly or infrequently, and amongst people from many backgrounds and life experiences. Encouragingly, there were many positive responses from members of the online community, who feel included both as a result of their being explicitly mentioned during live-streamed services and through participation in online groups.

Social justice was another recurring theme (including many references to SJP's practical outreach initiatives FEAST, Sunday Breakfast Club, and Wardrobe), with respondents stating that St James's commitment to this ethos is an important part of what it means to be Christian. Respondents feeling as though they are part of a community ("warts and all") was also a common response, with many valuing opportunities to contribute to the community via participation in different groups and discussions.

Some respondents identified St James's as a space where they were able to grapple with their own relationship to Christianity and to be challenged in their faith. Some other respondents, however, also stated that they do not feel as though they belong. Another theme that emerged is isolation, with respondents describing a struggle to make friends and a lack of a culture of socialising within the congregation outside of formal activities or groups. Groups at St James's currently include, but are not limited to: Earth Justice, Deep Abiding Prayer, Camino Companions, Young St James's and Pride of St James. With feelings of isolation came a sense of anonymity for some. There were expressions of gratitude to the clergy for their work, as well as to staff, volunteers, and congregation groups leaders. At the same time, some respondents stated that they felt at a distance from the clergy and that they were unable to engage with them.

The standing item of safeguarding comprised a verbal report this time. St James's has progressed to Level 3 on the Diocesan dashboard. There were 28 safeguarding reports over the last six months – which works out at about one a week – which raises pastoral care needs and response. There are no specific patterns identified – people raise a wide variety of concerns and experiences. It was noted that St James's is a place that encourages reporting and is building a positive and open culture of safeguarding. It was reiterated that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility.

Finally, there was a discussion about a paper from the Earth Justice Group and the large amount of excellent material generated by and with them. The discussion focused on how best to share their activities online and make this accessible for both public and academics alike, including archives of past projects. Conversations will continue regarding this in the coming months.

Keith Best
PCC Secretary
11/03/2025