

Roger Dixon came to the parish with some experience of the area, having been curate of St Mary, Droylsden for four years in the 1980's. It is interesting that it is normal to address the vicar by his (or in the future her) Christian name. It was Stephen Tomline, it is Roger Dixon; it is unimaginable that Mr Eagar was ever addressed with such informality. Roger is a bachelor.

The induction occurred in February, with a blizzard blowing outside the church. Because of the large number of people unable to get to the church, a second less formal welcome was held in June with the first use of the St Stephen's Praise (song book), and the service included visiting musicians.

On his interview Mr Dixon was told that the policy of St Stephen's was not to permit gambling of any sort. This had been enforced by Mr Tomline. Since Mr Dixon had welcomed and accepted this view at his interview he insisted that it should continue even though very few of the PCC could see the wrong in a raffle or a tombola stall. It will be interesting to see what the next Minister in charge of St Stephen's will be told at their interview.

In 2003 Rev. Dixon was appointed Area Dean of Ashton-under-Lyne Deanery. For many years Roger was a member of the Manchester Clergy Cricket team and captained them in two seasons. It is believed he was an elusive spin bowler, a good close in fielder and a stonewalling batsman.

Sunday services have continued to become less formal or perhaps more correctly with more participation of the general congregation. Three lay assistants were appointed to join the Reader in serving the wine at the Communion, and prayers are led by church members.

In 1997 Roger had sabbatical leave of some eleven weeks. This took the form of two sessions at Ridley Hall Cambridge with a period in between in the Holy Land. The subject studied was "The Temple" with a large thesis written on the subject.

He has made several other trips to the Holy Land and led a party there in November 1999. These visits very much influenced his sermons speaking from first hand experience of the geography of Palestine. The sermons usually delivered from the chancel steps are interesting and frequently involve visual aids. He has given many slide shows of the Holy Land and has led several walks around Dove Stone reservoir simulating on a small scale the layout of the Sea of Galilee.

Sunday morning services are predominantly Holy Communion, but when the vicar is away Morning Service is used led by the Reader. Baptisms are included in the Communion service, in order to emphasise the welcome into the Church family, and to show how baptism is a very important event. Although many families simply come to have their children 'done', visits are made before the day by the vicar and other people to emphasise we are taking the matter seriously and this has had some success; several couples with very young children became regular worshippers.

At the start of Mr Dixon's ministry the in-house produced St Stephen's Praise hymn book was used in conjunction with Hymns Ancient and Modern, however Mission Praise and Junior Praise were introduced and from the year 2000 Hymns Old and New. Since the editors of this hymn book changed some of the traditional words to those they thought more politically correct, Mission Praise is still in use on many occasions. The organ accompanies the singing, although the organ tuners continue to warn that a major overhaul will be required in the near future. There is no permanent organist, but it is rare to have a service without the organ. The choir consists of three or four ladies and one gentleman. The services were changed in 2001 to those in Common Worship and separate booklets were produced for Holy Communion, Baptism, Weddings and Funerals.

Evening Services are held twice a month, Evening Prayer and a Praise Service. These take place in the Memorial Hall with a small congregation of perhaps eight people. Nevertheless the informal atmosphere does lead to a very worthwhile hour. The minimum age for Confirmation was raised to fourteen years, with young people after some instruction taking Communion some what younger.

Two Evening Services each year have been held with St Peter's church Ashton. These have been very well attended by both congregations and a very good ambience has been established.

A regular monthly 'Midweek Fellowship' and informal meeting for discussion, praise and prayer started in 1991, with up to a dozen regular participants. In 1997 two bible study groups of some eight people each, were formed meeting fortnightly in the homes of two of the members.

The Audenshaw Council of Churches continues to thrive with Joint Services in each of the six churches. Several prayer walks have taken place going from Red Hall Methodists to St Hilda's calling at the four intermediate churches singing a hymn and saying a prayer in each.

A 'Day Away' at Crawshawbooth led by the Bishop of Middleton was particularly successful.

The joint Whit Walks on Whit Sunday continued until 2003 when because of falling interest they were replaced by an afternoon praise service for the six churches.

ACT has also run many of the Lent Courses the added numbers and different traditions helping greatly to understand our Faith.

The number of communicants has remained fairly constant under Mr Dixon's incumbency around 3000 per year.

In June 1996 the church celebrated its 150th anniversary. This was very successful attracting many people who hardly ever cross the church portals. The Bishop of Manchester preached on the first Sunday, the Bishop of Middleton preached at the children's service on the Thursday and the Dean of Manchester Cathedral preached at the Mother's Union Service on the Tuesday. We certainly got the big guns! The Wednesday saw a Musical evening and on the Saturday there was a sung Choral Evensong with a large guest choir. This was followed by a great social evening in St Paul's centre.

The church building was painted for the anniversary and the balcony cleared. A large exhibition of photographs along with the various church records was arranged in the side pews. This attracted a lot of attention from the visitors. The first edition of this booklet was produced for the occasion, along with an Anniversary Mug.

During Mr Dixon's incumbency the church magazine has increased in size and the presentation improved this being made possible with the advent of Desk Top Publishing packages. The vicar writes many articles on matters of faith and also news from both the parish and wider afield. A certain amount of humour was added by the editors particularly in the April editions when such things as a local supermarket sponsoring the choir, and on another occasion the proposal by the vicar to try theme weddings (football, Cowboys and Indians etceteras). The articles invariably caught someone out. A contributor with the pseudonym "Voice from the Back pew" asked pertinent questions about the running of the Church of England. With the introduction of digital cameras and digital scanners, it was possible to introduce photographs.

In an attempt to reach a wider audience a Parish Newsletter was produced three times a year (Christmas, Easter, and Harvest) and distributed to each household in the parish. This contained a relevant message and details of the special services.

The Mothers Union has continued with monthly meetings and an annual dinner. The branch has been run without a committee, but hopefully this will change in the near future allowing members to participate more fully in the choice of activities.

For four years an independent ladies group (OTLG the Over Thirties Ladies Group) was organised and attracted church members and their friends. The activities were varied aroma therapy, yoga, visiting speakers, boat trips, a very successful "A Bit of a Do" in May 2001 at St Paul's Centre. Collections from the meetings and events were sent to charities.

Once a month the Tuesday Group for elderly members meets in a member's home and transport is arranged for the housebound.

A small Men's Group (the Over Fifties Play Group) has met regularly each Friday since 1993, cleaning painting and generally working on the church fabric. Serious theological subjects are often muted, usually from twenty foot up a ladder and the Christmas party in the Boundary has been the big social occasion for all the men in the congregation. More recently because the noise level in the Boundary (2 TV sets on different stations and a juke box) became unbearable the OFPG moved to the Pack Horse where it is still possible to drink and have a conversation.

The church building is old and continual maintenance and repairs are required. Some of the tasks carried out by outside contractors are as follows: major repairs to the roof over the south nave aisle, new carpets were laid in the nave and memorial hall, runners were placed on all the pew seats, new locks were fitted to all the doors, the replacement of the amplification system to allow the use of radio microphones and a loop system for the hard of hearing.

The church faced closure in 2002. Work was in progress on pointing the tower, when major problems were discovered. Various pieces of masonry were loose and the clock was in danger of falling off the tower. It was only because of a bequest under the will of Mr Jimmy Bradley that the repair work could be completed.

Major tasks undertaken by the OFPG are as follows: Painting the chancel, the Memorial Hall, the nave apart from the north wall, re-plastering the south gallery wall, re-decorating the vestry, fitting additional lighting in the balconies and installing lights in the south stairwell, installing safety lights on the outside walls, rewiring many of the electrical circuits, fitting thermostatic controls to the central heating system, dealing with dry rot under the memorial hall floor, fitting of fire seals on balcony doors. Three bookcases were made for the storage of hymn and service books in the memorial hall and notice boards were made for the hall and children's corner. The surplus amplification system was modified to play recordings of bells from the tower; this work was however stopped by the vicar before the system was fully tested.

In 1997 and 1998 because of the building of the Manchester Ring Road (M60) Guide Lane had to be widened as it approached the junction with Audenshaw Road and Stockport Road. It was necessary to exhume remains from the graves adjoining Guide Lane. The remains were cremated and interred in another part of the graveyard. This was all done in a respectful courteous and considerate way. As part of the work a roadway was made from the west and around the church. The Lych gate was pulled down all the stone blocks were marked and the gateway rebuilt some twenty metres nearer the church.

Two big band concerts were arranged by two church members to raise money that was urgently required, the only other fund raising events being the garden party and Annual Christmas fair.

The Fun Club for young people meets regularly on a Monday evening in the Memorial Hall and in the Church grounds when the weather permits. The numbers vary at times reaching perhaps twenty.

The Sunday Club meets after church on Sunday morning; the children are young and the numbers small. But those that attend are regular and do enjoy the meeting. Each Easter a Holy Week Club is held in the School attracting children up to 11 years old. This is enjoyed very much by the children and the adult helpers.

The church's income comes predominantly from the giving of the church members (80%). The main expense is the parish share; the money paid to the diocese by the parish to cover in the main clergy salaries. The parish share is worked out using a formula based on church attendance and of the estimated financial situation of the attendees, spreading the required diocesan income between the parishes. The parish will find it increasingly difficult to meet the parish share, and probably impossible to set aside money for development and essential maintenance.

The congregation of St Stephen's church is much smaller than when it was founded. It is no longer the focus for the social activities of the district.

Society is very different but God is the same.