

The Parish Church of St George, Belfast

Report of the Select Vestry

Report for 2023



NI registered Charity Number NIC 101556 since January 2015

Administrative Details: Who we are

Saint George's is a Church of Ireland parish within the Diocese of Connor and the Rural Deanery of Central Belfast. Its address is 105 High Street, Belfast BT1 2AG. It was opened for public worship in 1816 on a site which had already been consecrated as a place of Christian worship for many hundreds of years.

The responsibility for the management of the parish lies with the Select Vestry (SV) which is elected at our Easter General Vestry (EGV) meeting. This is held no later than the 2nd week after Easter each year. Those members of the congregation who are eligible to vote at the EGV or to stand for election are those who have chosen to become members of the General Vestry.

The Rector – the Reverend Brian Stewart – is an ex officio member of the Select Vestry and presides at its meetings. The two Church Wardens and the two Glebe Wardens are also ex officio members. One Glebe Warden and one Church Warden are nominated by the Rector. The other two wardens are elected from among the members of the General Vestry as are the parish's representatives at the Diocesan Synod and the parochial nominators who represent the parishioners on a Board of nomination should the incumbent retire, move or die in post.

In addition to the ex officio members up to twelve parishioners are elected to serve on the SV. The SV elects such other officers as it requires to fill specific functions such as secretary and treasurer and also appoints a charity co-ordinator and members of the Safeguarding Committee. The SV meets monthly apart from July and August when a caretaker committee consisting of the officers looks after day to day issues which require decisions.

Those who served on the Select Vestry in addition to the Rector in the calendar year 2023 (elected at the Easter Vestry in 2022 and / or 2023) are as follows: Tony Merrick, Douglas McIlldoon, Pam Tilson, Fr Graeme Pollock, George Storey, Madeline Welch, Peter Hunter, Chris Jenkins, Michael McGlade, Matty Jeffrey, Agape Laoye, Lyn McGlade, Philip Black, Selby Nesbitt, Rod Clarke, Billy McArthur, James Beattie and James Dingley.

No trustee other than the Rector receives any payment from the parish. The payment to the Rector is his stipend and locomotory expenses paid in accordance with the scales set each year by the Church of Ireland. In addition to the payment of the Rector's stipend, the Church employs a sexton on a part time basis and funds the cost of a Director of Music, Assistant Organist and vocal coach through a dedicated music budget.

In addition to the Rector, Rev'd Brian Stewart, there are a number of other clergy who assist in a variety of ways in Parish life. Rev'd Willian Odling Smee assists at most Sunday 11am services. Other Honorary Assistant Priests who assisted over the course of the year include Archdeacon Scott Harte and Rev Dr Keith Suckling. Rev'd Graeme Pollock facilitates our Walsingham group and has been instrumental in preparing new members of the congregation particularly from Iran who have presented themselves candidates for baptism and confirmation. As well as assisting with preparation of Iranian parishioners for baptism and confirmation alongside Rev'd Graeme Pollock, Meisam Khalili continued to assist at services in his role as a Parish Reader.

Charitable Purpose and Public Benefit: what we do

The statements of public benefit and charitable purpose, which were declared in 2015 on being recognised by and registered as a charity by the Northern Ireland Charity Commission, have not been amended or changed in any way in 2023. The charitable purpose is the advancement of religion. The parish seeks to do this by its presence, and by what it does, in the city centre. The beneficiary is the general public. We aspire to being "an open door in the heart of the city; a place of prayer and peace". To this end the church is open, with few exceptions, six or seven days a week in the morning and until three o'clock in the afternoon. Outside these hours additional services are held on Sundays and on certain days of the year.

Public worship is in the Anglican tradition in the form of the Eucharist, Morning and Evening Prayers. On Sundays evening prayer normally takes the form of Choral Evensong. Public worship takes place every Sunday at an early service at 9.30am, a Eucharist at 11am and Evensong at 5pm. A mid week eucharist continues to be

celebrated at 10.30am each Wednesday. In addition the church is open and welcoming most days to those who wish to pray or to pause for a few moments from the activities of the day.

Christian worship takes a variety of forms. Part of the vocation of Saint George's is to add to that rich diversity the welcoming presence of liturgy and music in the Anglican tradition and to offer it where it is accessible to the greatest number of people - in the heart of the city.

We have continued to livestream our services online via the church Facebook page. Online streaming allowed our regular attendees to continue to partake of worship (even if not in a public context). It allowed those with connections with the Parish but who have moved away to reconnect with St George's. Regularly we had (and continue to have) people joining in from across the island of Ireland, from the rest of the UK and from further afield. People from the USA, France, Australia and the Philippines have all joined our online services at some point, and some continue to do so regularly. Our services regularly have over 100 watching either as they are livestreamed or viewed at a later time and often many more. Our Facebook page now has over 1000 followers.

There were eight baptisms, two weddings and five funerals conducted during 2023. Six candidates were confirmed by the Bishop at the Easter Eve ceremony as had long been the tradition in the Parish. There were a total of 272 households registered in the Parish, an increase from 266 in 2022.

How we do it

Our Choir

The parish choir is a robed choir of men and boys. We support also the Chamber Choir of mixed voices. We regard, as part of our vocation, the provision of a good quality musical education, training and apprenticeship for young people. The far reaching results of this are reflected in the number of young men who, having started their musical formation as choristers in Saint George's, now occupy positions as organists or choir masters throughout the wider Anglican Communion. Many young men have

progressed to undertake Choral and Organ scholarships while pursuing third level education.

The year 2022-2023 was a re start year. The Covid restrictions were no longer in place, although we continued to use the Air filter in the Chancel.

The choir consisted of 16 trebles and 16 gentlemen, including 10 under 18 choral scholars.

The choir sang the services and had the usual routine of Rehearsals during the week.

David Falconer and Daniel Clements visited schools for recruitment purposes and we added a further 7 probationers to the choir: Sean, Matthew, and Arthur from St Bride's, Milo and Rocco from Inchmarlo, Leo from Campbell and Stefan joined as the youngest brother of Matthew and Thomas, although only in P3.

The choral scholars continued to make good progress, with Luke and Nicholas achieving distinctions in Grade 8 ABRSM, Oliver taking Grade 7 and Daniel with distinction in his ARSM diploma. Trebles David Miscampbell and Noah Burke both achieved Grade 5 singing in the summer term.

We ended the term with a day singing the services in St Bartholomew's in Dublin. We received a lovely welcome and performed at a very high standard. Head chorister, Max Blakely retired to the choral scholars after his voice broke.

The summer was supposed to be a time when major renovation work took place in the choir room, but this did not happen due to poor third party management. This work was carried out later in the autumn of 2023.

The new term saw a move to use the Friends of Cathedral Music grant that we had been awarded previously. With this money, we invested in iPads and Forscore in order to digitise the choir library. With the help of a parent lawyer, we agreed a contract to allow each chorister an iPad and to ensure that all weekly music is added to it during rehearsals. We also used a donated TV to display the scores on Apple TV. The rest of the funds purchased a Yamaha G5 piano for the church.

We planned for a choir trip to Berlin in June/July 2024.

The choir sang for charity Christmas concerts at the Harbour and in La Mon hotel as well as the usual concerts in the church for Christmas and end of term.

Staff included David Falconer, Maeve Falconer, Mark McGrath and Daniel Clements.

Outreach

Saint George's provides – with the consent of the Bishop - a home for a small Russian Orthodox community in Belfast who use the church and facilities approximately once a month.

This is in addition to the work we undertake with organisations such as the Welcome Organisation to support those who are homeless, as well financial support for Storehouse to continue its work in providing a foodbank for those in need. As a result of the pandemic the foodstore which the parish supports ceased to do weekly collections of food, but the generosity of some parishoners ensured that we were able to make significant financial contributions to foodstore to allow them to continue to help those most in need.

In association with organisations such as Changing Attitude Ireland a service is held on IDAHOT Sunday (International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia) in May each year. The 2023 service saw us welcome the Very Rev'd Susan Green. Dean of Cloyne as our preacher. The Parish also usually joins alongside Changing Attitude and churches from other denominations to support 'Christians at Pride' – a group affirming LGBT inclusion – to support Belfast Pride and walk as a group in the Parade in August.

Mission and support

We continued to support, financially and in our prayers, our linked diocese of Northern Zambia and our partners in mission in Zambia as well as other church and secular charities which are listed in our accounts.

Parish Organisations

The Walsingham Group meets on the last Thursday of each month for a celebration of the Eucharist and to enjoy fellowship over lunch. The Group is open to anyone from any Christian denomination who is interested in promoting the work of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk England which includes the aim of bringing together the various Christian Churches to a greater understanding of each other and ultimately Unity. In late September 2023 nine members of the Belfast Ecumenical Group once again made the annual pilgrimage to Walsingham. The trip included a two night stop with the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield, West Yorkshire

Safeguarding Trust

The Safeguarding Trust Panel in 2023 consisted of the Rector, Lyn McGlade, Karen Brett and James Beattie. The panel ensured that all relevant Access NI applications and annual declarations were completed. The members of the panel also undertook training as required by the Diocese which was held online and updated the Vestry at their meeting each month as required.

Maintaining the Buildings

The Parish is responsible for meeting all the running costs of the Glebe, its repair and upkeep to provide a home and office for the Rector.

The total cost of the Glebe in 2023 was £7701.01 This represented the cost of insurance, telephone, rates and ground rent and some minor repairs and decoration.

The Glebe is in effect endowed using the profit from the sale of the house which previously served as the Rectory. If the cost of the rectory exceeds the income the gap is bridged by Parish funds. In recent years the income from the Glebe has exceeded the expenditure needed so that in a modest way the Glebe is helping to finance the church. In 2023 Glebe income was £5588.20, indicating a deficit of £2112.82. This was primarily due to £3547.97 on necessary painting costs.

Significant repairs and refurbishment were undertaken to the Church building in the course of 2023 and are outlined in the finance section of the report.

Parish Finances in 2023.

Financially this was always going to be a challenging year for the parish. Some of the challenges came to us and some were challenges which the parish chose to shoulder at this time.

In 2023 the parish's income rose but less than the rate of inflation from £230,623 in 2022 to £235,373.

Parish expenditure increased from £240,412 in 2022 to £329,604 giving an excess of expenditure over normal in-year income of £94,231.

There were several factors which coincided in 2023 to disrupt our ability to balance our books by growing parish income annually - as we must because even modest levels of inflation mean that last year's income is normally insufficient to cover next year's costs and we have had two years' of above average inflation. While this was of course the financial environment in which all churches, charities and households had to operate for us it coincided with additional financial burdens which we started to tackle in 2023.

The Quinquennial Report had indicated that the Victorian era brickwork at the rear of the church required re-pointing. This was a major piece of work which locked this part of the building in a scaffolding embrace for many months. It is a testimony to the skill of the original builders that their work had never hitherto needed to be renewed in a hundred and sixty years. We hope that it will be another century and more before later generations of parishioners have to repeat the repointing.

The need for improving the accommodation and other aspects of our facilities for our choirs and the musical training of both boys and girls led to the complete refurbishment of the choir room. These two projects along with other inescapable costs associated with the state, upkeep, maintenance and security of the church and the church grounds required an expenditure in excess of £115,000 on capital project and their ancillary

costs. This represents a six fold increase on our average annual investment in the fabric of our building.

This year also saw a large preliminary expenditure on the choir and church music and in particular preparation for the 2024 choir trip to Berlin. Total expenditure on choir and music thus increased from £25,808 in 2022 to £52,344. Again half of this increase will be re-couped in 2024 as funds come in for financing the choir trip. And the other half is investment in equipment - including a new piano and ipads for the choristers - which will earn its keep for many years to come.

It had been recognised for some time that it would at some point be necessary to ensure that the organ would require attention and considerable investment to prolong and enhance its life. The organ's last major work was in 1978 and the Select Vestry is well aware of the need to raise a substantial sum to enable us to tackle this work to the high standard incumbent on the parish. Consequently an organ appeal fund was launched formally towards the end of 2023 and by the end of the year approximately £24,000 had been raised for the organ fund which will grow with interest and further fund raising drives in 2024 and – if necessary - beyond.

As life got fully back to normal after Covid there were some increased costs arising from the church's being open and active on more hours of the year with the inevitable knock-on effects on basic expenditure such as gas and electricity but also liturgically on - for example - candles and wafers. Otherwise parish costs were well under control.

As far as possible the Select Vestry seeks to ensure that where expenditure exceeds income the benefits of that expenditure will be of measurable financial value to the parish for many future years – and in some cases for decades. The Select Vestry also recognises that - unless we manage it well - spending in excess of current income risks robbing next year's Peter to pay this year's Paul by jeopardising future income from investments and deposits. The Select Vestry has been able to finance the 2023 deficit without directly impairing the parish's investment income which it regards as an inheritance gifted to the present congregation from previous generations of the saints who worshipped in Saint George's and who bequeathed to us our presence and witnessing vocation in the centre of our city.

The above report is signed on behalf of the Select Vestry by

Reverend Brian Stewart (Rector)

Lyn McGlade (Secretary to the Select Vestry)