

Vestry report 2021
Priest-in-charge, Eben Grobbelaar

To the Parishioners of St George's, Parktown

Since my appointment to St George's just over a year ago, services for eight months were online, predictably causing lessened interaction and primarily through Zoom, over the telephone, email, or other digital means. My tenure thus far seems to be largely defined by the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the circumstances offered opportunities of advancing the vision determined a year ago, and of bringing glory to God.

At the vestry meeting of 2020 I described the vision of what a New Creation community is and could achieve. Providentially we set up a media portfolio and initiated the conversation of what systems are required to grow our cultural footprint, utilising, and growing the best of what St George's already has to offer and making it available to a global audience. This has been realised to some extent with some of our videos going viral.

When the countrywide hard lockdown was instated, we therefore were quick to be out of the blocks in ensuring that ministry and spiritual formation continued with efficiency and prophetic relevancy. Administrative processes, staff operations, meetings, and pastoral care also had to continue apart from what were produced for Sunday and midweek services. During the course of 2020 we had gone through a series of pioneering phases, creating processes that would address the organisational and ministry demands as they frequently changed. No leader in this generation has had to deal with the unprecedented nature of these circumstances. As an employer and religious organisation, we had to establish safety protocols for our staff, who returned to work on an alternate basis as soon as we could, and for our parishioners worshipping together in the sacred space of the church building.

Lockdown, fear, extra precaution, economic pressure, and death negatively affected income and our human resource capacity, causing all ministry budgets to be cut and activities to be reassessed. It has been and continues to be a time of nervousness and stress. The temptation is both to exaggerate the crisis as well as to underrate it. A practice I implemented was to listen to the perceptions and experiences of parishioners, assessing what the general mood and spiritual health of the parish is amid pervasive uncertainty.

I am grateful for being part of the community of St George's. As I spoke to parishioners, many enquired about my wellbeing. Despite the loss of income, the fragmentation of our community structures, and limited freedom, the perseverance, wisdom, generosity, and sincerity of parishioners are praiseworthy, and at times unquestionably astonishing. Relatively speaking, while the financial year ended in a deficit, the consistent quality of ministry, events, and projects undertaken to address our arising needs outweighs the material loss. No staff member of St George's lost his or her job.

The prophetic message that this testifies of is that God's people are committed, are willing to fund good in this world, and are prepared to sacrifice in order to support their faith community. On the part of the leadership and staff of St George's we want to honour such oneness, and in our reciprocal relationship, foster intentional discipleship that will equip believers to make better sense of these tumultuous times. It requires in due part that we, with the onus especially on me, to be discerning, informed, and courageous to speak into contexts where self-serving motives are noticeable. The felt experience can therefore be overwhelming, while the prospect is that we are being spiritually formed and our capacity developed. I have repeatedly become aware that it is a work of the Holy Spirit, which we need to daily relinquish to.

Our concern and responsibility is not just to be abreast with theological, social, and other intellectual thought with which we can help others and engage with, but also to share in their sufferings. We heard of the pandemic of Gender Based Violence that was exacerbated during the lockdown. It prompted us to give greater prophetic expression, voiced to some extent during our Spring Lectures. The mental health of all strata of our parish has been affected, from the youth to families needing to cope with extra demands, to the isolated elderly. Bereavement counselling became more difficult as families struggled dealing with death in their nuclear units. 'Covid support' forces us to examine afresh the risks we are prepared to take in caring and living up to our social responsibility. The Covid period is a time that we will probably and should not forget. In fact, I hope that we can commemorate in a tangible way in our garden of remembrance the passing of so many friends.

As we look to the future, with dabbled light breaking through, key areas already identified last year become all the more apparent. We need to continue developing 1) digital infrastructure and systems, 2) young leadership and intentional discipleship, 3) environmental sustainability, and 4) social entrepreneurship. Perhaps this is more than what we can chew in a single bite, but I believe the greater the vision, the more potential we unlock in people.

St George's has been at the centre of many people's lives for over a century. This parish retains its prominent stance thanks to the innovative and careful consideration of its leaders, but more importantly of its members, finding their identity in the community of St George's, and living up to the values collectively espoused to dutifully serve the common good. I trust that this is as much a call to action as a report on the life of the parish. St George's offers peer-to-peer support, where families and friends unreservedly help one another. Opportunities of inter-generational mentorship exist amid the desire to engage in authentic discussions about all facets of life, especially of worldview and spirituality.

With deep gratitude I commend this report to you as a summary of life in the parish. Portfolio reports will give more details of specific achievements and outcomes.