

Trustees' Report for year ended 31/12/2022

The year 2022 looks like it will be one of the watersheds of world history; in the United Kingdom we celebrated the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II at the start of the year and mourned her loss in the autumn. After what must be the longest apprenticeship in history, her son Charles became King at the age of 74.

The past year was also notable as the year of the three Prime Ministers. Boris Johnson was ousted for misleading parliament and the people, Lis Truss lasted a mere 49 days in office owing to her incompetence before she was replaced by the former Chancellor, Richie Sunak. In Northern Ireland, devolved government collapsed when the Democratic Unionists withdrew from the mandatory coalition in protest at the Northern Ireland Protocol. This instability looks likely to continue throughout 2023.

In the wider world, Covid-19 faded from public attention in the light of events in eastern Europe. In February, Russia recognised the breakaway Donbass republics as a prelude to an invasion. This triggered unprecedented sanctions by the US, UK and EU member states and their allies against the Russian state, Russian companies, banks, and prominent individuals and led to a massive refugee crisis as millions of people fled their homes.

The knock-on effect of the Ukrainian conflict exacerbated shortages caused by Covid-19. Oil and gas prices rocketed, leading to a massive increase in the cost of living. By the end of the year, the inflation rate had reached 12 per cent. As we enter 2023, the situation looks likely to be unsettled for the foreseeable future.

At First Church, we were able to hold normal services once the onerous Covid restrictions eased. Despite this, regular attendance figures at our morning service continued to drop.

In June we held a groundbreaking Freedom Festival with talks, a discussion panel and musical events based on our congregation's history of opposition to slavery and exploitation

In July and August we were able to hold our regular Summer Recitals series without the need for pre-booking by members of the public. Numbers were down on pre-pandemic levels, but things look encouraging for a full restoration in 2023.

In September we bade farewell to Rev Simon Henning, our pastor for the

past four years. Since then we have welcomed a variety of people to lead our worship. In 2022, we welcomed Mrs Linda Kane, Rev Alister Bell, Rt Rev Chris Hudson, Rev Ian Carton, Mr Des McKeown, Dr David Alderdice, Ms Felicity Huston, Mr Jean Dumas and Mr David Kerr to our pulpit. We are grateful to everyone who has helped us to keep things running in these challenging times.

Special thanks are due to Mr Des McKeown whose work for the congregation is legendary, Mr Raymond O'Regan for keeping our history alive to the general public, Mr Richard Yarr for keeping the music to a high standard, Mrs Suzanne Martin for her outstanding floral displays, Dr Pamela Topping for her assistance and advice and all you unsung heroes whose contribution goes unnoticed. Thank you for your help with readings, serving tea and coffee, putting up and taking down Christmas decorations, offering lifts to less mobile congregants and all the other essential tasks that often go unnoticed or are taken for granted. You know who you are. Thank you.

In October, we were delighted to baptise the twin sisters, Christin and Mavis Elton-Steven and welcome so many family members and friends from all over Northern Ireland, Wales, England and the USA.

We congratulate our Director of Music, Mr Richard Yarr, who was awarded the MBE by the late Queen in her Birthday Honours in June.

We welcomed into membership Mrs Alice Woods.

Sadly, two long-standing members of the congregation died in the autumn.

In September, we lost Mrs Marion Taylor, just two weeks after her beloved husband Desmond's death. Marion was a mainstay of our choir and often sang solo pieces. We extend our sympathy to her sons Michael and Colin and the wider family circle.

Our sorrow was compounded shortly afterwards with the death of Mrs Rosemary Swann. Rosemary was deeply loved by us all and remembered especially for her floral displays. We remember Jim and the wider family circle in our prayers.