

Maxine's state of the nation review! (or the Lay worker's report!)

There are times when my appreciation of this church leaves me breathless and this year has been one of those times. When I arrived at APC six years ago I never intended to stay as long as I have and APC was a different place. The house-groups were struggling and there were deep concerns about the pastoral heart of our church. However, over this year I have witnessed beautiful moments, which have encouraged my heart and left me convinced that APC is a very different place now.

People making a huge effort to be in church, others helping them get there, people giving their time to look after someone's family as they spend time at hospital, others cooking meals, ironing and visiting without being asked when times were hard. Seeing people praying for each other spontaneously in the seats, and hearing the outcomes of prayers prayed via the prayer chain, envelopes of money arriving anonymously and unexpectedly when people most needed it and non-Christians commenting on the faithful support, visiting and encouragement of those in hospital. People inundated with text messages of prayer support and kind thoughts at key times. People on the fringes of our church being welcomed, listened to and so grateful for your prayers, and stories of people, reading scripture, praying and sitting with people as they have been ill and even dying. You have done all these things and much more and I can't find the words to thank you and encourage you to keep going.

When I went off on maternity leave six months ago I jokingly said that I wanted you to do me out of a job and I think you may have done it! The pastoral committee have been brilliant and I want to thank them personally. Things aren't perfect and especially on those occasions when the team have endeavoured to do our utmost to organise events and meet people's needs only to be rejected and criticised -in those rare moments you kept going and faithfully continued to serve even when it hurt.

Most movingly, Mark, Samuel and I have experienced first hand the pastoral support, love, prayers, generosity and amazing encouragement of so many of you during Mark's cancer treatment last year, Samuel's birth and Mark's Dad's illness and subsequent death. This has shown us what an outstanding heart our church has for Christ and each other, and that in itself speaks volumes and our year would have been very different without you. You are amazing.

Jerry Cook in his book 'Love, Acceptance and forgiveness' speaks about a commitment that people in his church make to each other: *"I want you to know that I'm committed to you. You'll never knowingly suffer at my hands. I'll never say or do anything knowingly to hurt you. I'll always, in every circumstance, seek to help you and support you. If you're down and I can lift you up, I'll do it. Anything I have that you need, I'll share with you; and if need be, I'll give it to you. No matter what I find out about you, no matter what happens in the future - good or bad - my commitment to you will never change."* We may not have said these words to each other in our congregation but you are demonstrating the dedication, sacrifice and faithful love of Jesus between you and I want to thank you and encourage you to keep going. Look for opportunities to do more, be brave- speak to someone new, tell someone you may not know very well you're praying for them, drop in on someone unexpectedly, take them some flowers, and ask God to give you the ears to hear him prompting you when he wants you to do something for his family through you and then have the courage to do it. All of this has been so very moving to see... so don't stop. And I'll be collecting my P45 from Phil on my way out..... !

Maxine Roberts, April 2008.