

Annual General Meeting 2024

Rector's Report

My fourth report as rector of NEAC comes at a rather busy time, yet also one full of encouraging things. Two weeks ago we received the Archbishop. On Friday night we hosted Händel's Messiah. Next week we farewell Kez Ashby. Then it's Easter, then the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of St Stephen's, then a Moore College mission concluding with the public launch of our new 4pm Erskineville congregation!

All this activity is thankfully guided by a clear sense of focus signalled in our vision prayer:

May we more and more become a community deeply shaped by the good news of Jesus, holding it out to those around us with confidence, gentleness and joy.

Along with this, we have developed a set of Community Priorities that give more substance to some of the key things we think it would look like for God to answer this prayer.

Community Priorities

To be a church in which:

- We are not ashamed to speak the good news of Jesus but are full of a deep confidence and delight in its goodness
- We make it easy for people to find their way to Christian faith
- Sunday gatherings overflow with joy, thankfulness, and reverence
- The beauty and power of the word of God are well-served by preaching, teaching and music ministry
- Being single is honoured and celebrated as a life-path full of opportunities and distinctive goodness
- Marriage is honoured and families are helped to thrive
- Children and young people are given the space and encouragement they need to discover the grace and goodness of Christ
- Those who are struggling or sick experience gentleness and grace
- People with disabilities are not marginal but central, as brothers and sisters from whom we have gifts to receive
- Older people are respected as invaluable guides to life
- The kindness of God is shown in care for our neighbours
- Mission to the wider world is an unmissable commitment
- People are helped towards and well-trained for gospel ministry
- People are empowered and equipped to serve God in their workplaces and homes

In this report I want to simply review some of the key developments of the past year, before making a few comments about the path ahead. But before getting into this, I want to stress that I believe we are going in the right direction. This is the right thing to be praying and seeking at the moment, and I want to urge us to keep doing so!

Reviewing 2023–24

Our overall numbers on Sundays appear to have stabilised at a level above the previous years, which means we have recently seen important growth in overall size.

(Rough) average adult Sunday attendance:			
2021	2022	2023	2024
186	170	222	236

200 adults is often regarded as a significant transition point for churches, because this number of people often creates a combination of social and organisational complexity that is hard to manage, creating frustrations and problems that inhibit further growth.

My sense is that, although we are experiencing some of this stress, we are handling it well. The morning congregation has adjusted to being a bigger gathering, and the evening is enjoying the presence of newcomers. We are working to build structures that support this size better.

Reviewing my rector’s report and comments at Vision Sunday last year, I am heartened by the way we have been able to follow through on our key plans. We have made a real effort to continue to work on our welcome of newcomers, and now have some good teams and systems in place for hospitality and welcoming. I’m especially grateful to Lauren Errington, Rachel O’Brien, and Marcelle Rodgers for the efforts they have made to ensure these things are happening. I think the hospitality that has emerged at our services is a key part of the growth we have experienced.

We have also followed through on our plans to start a new congregation at Erskineville. I have been so encouraged to see this group form, make plans, and begin meeting as a congregation. Although we are still in our ‘soft launch’ phase, the signs are good that this project is working. I’m particularly grateful to Peter Rodgers for his leadership of this team.

At the centre of the regular life of our church are our connect groups. Last year, we had 15 connect groups, with a total of about 150 people. I want to acknowledge the consistent and critical work of our connect group leaders and leaders of our citizens course, without which our church would not hold together. I’m excited about the new connect group oversight team of Zac Anderson, Laura Yeates, Michael and Jo Charles, which is taking over from Kez this year.

Our kids and youth ministries are going well. Last year, we had an average of 10 kids in lil’est church, 25 kids in ‘lil church, 15–20 at Graveyard youth, and 8 at our Sunday youth program. Although there have been some challenges, particularly for youth in

term 4 last year, I am encouraged by the leadership Fergus is showing this year and the new patterns developing. In kids ministry, Megan continues to lead a strong team that will, I think, be stronger for the changed patterns of leadership she is putting in place. I want to publicly acknowledge the work of the kids and youth leaders. Thank you for your service of our community! I also want to acknowledge our SRE teachers: Megan Haviland, Cath Ahern, Tracey Szanto, Ran Liu, and Emily Deller, for all their efforts. Teaching SRE is hard work and a big commitment, but massively significant. Special thanks to Emily for her work as our SRE coordinator, which came to an end at the end of last year. We miss you already in this space!

Our community ministries have changed shape a little in the last year. Thanks so much to Phil and Liz Doughty, Brian and Susan Baumhammer, Carolyn Shute, and everyone who has made our community garden, bike shed, and We Belong happen. Marcelle has led an effort to bring together a number of our activities on a Saturday, often in line with working bees, to create a community hub of some kind. I continue to think this is a good idea. I remain convinced that the cemetery grounds are a key resource for ministry and outreach that we are not yet making the most of. I would love to see a team come together to think about how we can look after the cemetery better and integrate it into the life of the church. (Remember the Ethiopian highland churches!)

We were also blessed in the last year by the new initiative of the women's breakfasts. The brainchild of Caitlin Munday, these have been a gift to many people and a great encouragement. May many other great ideas and the energy to pursue them emerge among us!

At the end of last year, two significant ministries came to a close, namely, Cottage Church and the Food Ministry. Cottage Church had already transitioned to a different form after Phil Walker-Harding stood down at the end of 2022. Food Ministry needed to close both due to staffing reasons and, more importantly, due to volunteer shortages.

The last year has also seen further changes in the staff team, with the departure of Matt Aroney and the imminent departure of Kez from the team. Although these are significant losses, I am heartened by the positive spirit that accompanies them and the good relationships we continue to enjoy. It has also been a blessing to welcome James McDonald as music director, and Zac Anderson and Nick Meuli as student ministers.

The path ahead

At the Vision Services in November last year, I made clear that I thought our main priority for the coming year needed to be to 'stay on target'. We have a clear direction as a church and clear steps to pursue it. The key priorities for this year are to continue to build our welcome and hospitality, to establish the Erskineville congregation, and to build a culture of sharing the gospel through the Meet Jesus Campaign. Each of these goals takes a different shape at the congregational level. I'm encouraged by the progress we are already making on these and pray that it continues.

I am hopeful that after the next month, we will be able to settle into a rhythm as three Sunday congregations and set our minds primarily to building the regular life

of church and the Meet Jesus Campaign. We plan to integrate evangelistic activities into our connect groups and sermons.

I am very much looking forward to the year ahead for both the morning congregation and CiG. These congregations remain the centre and heart of the ministry of NEAC. They have wonderful opportunities for ministry and outreach, and they remain my first priority. (I have really enjoyed beginning to lead a CiG connect group this year!)

The Erskineville service is an exciting development, which we should give great thanks for. Holy Trinity Erskineville was planted by St Stephen's in the initial period of its ministry, prior to the building of the current St Stephen's. It then had multiple periods in which the rector of St Stephen's was also the incumbent of Erskineville. It was replanted under Peter Rodgers, and now is being replanted again! May God use these efforts to bring Jesus to one of the most secular areas of Australia.

I am praying and hoping that by the end of the year we will feel established as a church of three Sunday congregations, and a regular Sunday attendance of about 250 adults. (The numbers are entirely in God's hands, of course; but it's helpful to imagine this for the sake of planning.)

Two challenges

1. Ministry staff team

With the departure of Kez Ashby, we are, I think, clearly understaffed. Currently, we have 9 paid ministry team staff, including student ministers, with a total FTE of 4.3, and two admin staff with a total of 0.9 FTE. After Kez leaves in April, the FTE will be 3.7.

Our ministry staff team is predominantly part-time people. There are some downsides to this, but also very significant upsides. In particular, it means we are able to have a wide range of kinds of people on staff, whom we might not be able to hire otherwise.

As I said at Vision Sunday last year, my plan is to hire a new assistant minister at the end of this year. I am beginning to think about this already.

This means, however, that the rest of this year is going to be a little challenging. I am optimistic about this. It already means others are stepping up to serve in new ways. However, there are challenges. I am personally feeling the increased pressure in a range of ways, particularly on Sundays, which are now much more full. I want to take this opportunity to apologise for the ways I have already let some people down through being too stretched. I want also to ask for your patience if I am not able to attend to things in the ways you think I should. The most important thing is for me to keep my focus on 'prayer and the ministry of the word' (Acts 6:4). I confess to finding it very challenging to manage the range of things on my plate at the moment.

In order to expand our staff team, we will need to increase our offertory. I am hopeful about our capacity to do this, given we have experienced some growth. However, I do want to put before you the challenge and the goal: let's aim to be

able to straightforwardly hire a new assistant minister at the end of 2024 or beginning of 2025!

2. Maintenance

As we have often noticed previously, maintenance remains a significant challenge for us as a church. The research that has been done for our 150th anniversary celebrations has reminded us that we inherit some decades of under-spending on the buildings. It seems that really the congregation was in decline from the 1930s through to the 1970s. Sometimes this was nearly terminal – for a period in the 1960s, services seem to have been held mainly in the rectory for a handful of people. There was a modest revival under Don Meadows, but it did not last.

This is not to deprecate the achievements of the faithful people in these periods. Significant works were done, such as the replacement of the St Stephen's roof in the 1990s (I believe). This is a great help going forward. However, the fact is we are behind on maintenance of St Stephen's and its associated buildings. In addition, there are the challenges of the Erskineville site and the cemetery.

I am very encouraged by the progress we are making! Paula Carleton, following Ryan Southwell and others, has led a wonderful effort over the past year to get clear what our needs are and begin to make progress. In addition, we have grants in play for works on the hall, St Stephen's, and the cemetery. There is always more to do, but this is good! Parish Council and I continue in conversation with Sydney Anglican Property about possible developments at the Erskineville site, which continues to be a liability.

The challenges are significant, though. First and foremost is the challenge of the bell tower and spire. If restoration works are not undertaken on these, we will face increasing problems and safety issues. There are structural works needed at points in the church.

For these reasons, the parish council moved to open a tax-deductible National Trust account to receive donations towards heritage works on St Stephen's. This account is now available, and you may have seen information about it around the church. You can also see more by going to <https://www.neac.com.au/st-stephens-restoration-project/> There are also signs on the doors of church and in the entryway.

A small team has begun pursuing high-level donations towards the restoration of the spire, and has worked to set out the case for doing so. For your interest, this is attached to the end of this report. Can I encourage you to consider making a contribution to this project yourself? Though not as an alternative to your giving towards our ministry please! Without the ministry, which depends on our offertories, there will certainly be no restoration!

Our story at 150

I want to conclude my report by sharing how much I have been encouraged by what I've been learning about our history. I used to think that the story of this parish was a story of a parish that had at times taught an understanding of the faith I

regard as problematic, and had been quite anti-Sydney diocese, until it was revived after Peter Rodgers came in 2002. There is truth to this story, though it's never quite as simple as that. But what it has been a great joy to discover is that this parish, in its founding, was deeply evangelical in its theology and practice.

Listen, for example, to this comment about the ministry of Robert Taylor, in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*:

'From Newtown came a stream of ordinands and laymen who contributed especially to the 'Bible belt' of the expanding western suburbs: one local organization became the nucleus of the Church Lads' Brigade. When Moore College moved from Liverpool in 1886 to the site of old St Stephen's parsonage, his parish provided practical training for its students and he lent his house at Mount Victoria for its use. In 1884-88 he was also incumbent of the new church built in the working-class district of Erskineville. From work such as Taylor's the concept of modern parochial communal activities emerged.'

Taylor was known for his faith and his Reformation principles. The St Stephen's building itself declares this ministry in a whole range of ways, from the words on the reredos, to the windows and their Scriptures, to the Greek text, 'Have faith in God' in the vestry window.

I hope you have and are enjoying discovering some of this history at the moment. But what it means is that the present ministry of this church is not an aberration, a turn in a different direction, but a recovery of its original character. Praise God! What a gift to be able to be part of a church founded in a desire to share the gospel and awaken faith in God! May God renew this ministry more and more in the coming decades!

— Rev Dr Andrew Errington
17 March, 2024

ST STEPHEN'S NEWTOWN RESTORATION APPEAL

Give St Stephen's another 150 years!

'No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light' (Luke 8:16).

The community of Newtown Erskineville Anglican Church are seeking financial help to undertake urgently needed restoration works to their church home, St Stephen's Newtown. These works present a wonderful opportunity to assist a vibrant Christian church to continue to hold out the good news of Jesus in one of the most secular areas in Australia, and to preserve one of the most beautiful and theologically interesting buildings in Sydney.

The story of St Stephen's begins with a wonderful gospel ministry. Under the Rev Robert Taylor (rector from 1868), a man described as 'a first-class and a hundred per cent. Protestant and Low Churchman', and 'a man of unlimited and absolute faith in God',ⁱ the congregation grew dramatically. Funds were pledged and the Parliamentary grant was obtained to build a new church building within Camperdown Cemetery. This building was opened on April 7th, 1874. Taylor continued as rector until 1907, during which time the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* records that, 'From Newtown came a stream of ordinands and laymen who contributed especially to the "Bible belt" of the expanding western suburbs'.ⁱⁱ

The size and health of the church waned during the second half of the twentieth century. By the 1970s, the congregation was so small it met in the rectory lounge room. After a period of new life in the 1980's, the parish declined again and became provisional by the end of the century. However, after the appointment of the Rev Peter Rodgers as rector in 2002, a powerful renewal took place. New congregations were planted and the parish was joined with Erskineville to become Newtown Erskineville Anglican Church (NEAC).

Today St Stephen's is the home of a church community with a clear vision that matches the character with which it was founded. Our prayer is this:

May we become more and more a community deeply and beautifully shaped by the good news of Jesus, holding it out to those around us with confidence, gentleness, and joy.

NEAC united around this vision prayer as we emerged out of the pandemic of 2020–2021. The habits of bunkering down during the pandemic and the openly secular character of our local community meant there was a clear temptation to turn inwards – to become merely a safe place for Christians in a dangerous world. Yet as a church we knew Jesus had called us to let our light shine. To fail to look outwards and seek to share the good news we had heard would be as senseless as lighting a lamp and putting it under a basket. We therefore began praying this prayer and seeking new ways to hold out the gospel in our area.

We pursue this vision in one of the most secular areas in Australia. In 2021, 64% of people in Newtown and 65.8% of people in Erskineville described themselves as having 'No religion'. Yet our

experience is that, far from making this an impossible place to do ministry, it makes it exciting.

Many, many people are more open to hearing about Christ than people often expect. Many know themselves to be lost, like sheep without a shepherd. We find this to be especially the case among younger people, who, often free of many of the hang-ups of their parents' generation, are open to hearing of one 'who spoke with authority', unlike the many other voices around them.

Our ability to make the most of these opportunities is, however, imperilled by the significant repair and restoration needs that have emerged over the past year. Although the congregation is now larger than it has been since perhaps the 1960s – our Sunday attendance has grown to an average of over 220 adults and 50 children – the restoration needs far exceed our capacity. The spire, in particular, needs significant repair work, without which we may not be able to keep the main doors open. The building has a worn out appearance that tells a story of faded glory, rather than vital, contemporary gospel renewal. In addition, the congregation must meet these challenges while also managing and maintaining seven other heritage listed buildings and a historic cemetery. The congregation is actively and sacrificially engaged in these challenges, yet there is a real danger of the building needs gradually overwhelming the ministry.

St Stephen's Newtown is a beautiful church. The eminent architectural historian Morton Herman has called St Stephen's 'one of the finest Gothic Revival buildings in Sydney'. It's design, he writes, is 'a magnificent success. . . a church designed to be seen all round from every angle, and from every angle it is eminently satisfactory'. Joan Kerr describes the church as one of Edmund Blacket's 'most successful buildings', Blacket having, by 1870 'completely mastered his Decorated Gothic repertoire' and [being] more confident in composition and less fussy in detailing than in some of his earlier designs.' The tower and spire are thought to be one of Blacket's finest compositions.ⁱⁱⁱ

St Stephen's is also a building designed with deep gospel convictions in clear view. When the building was designed, Taylor insisted that half of the pews be 'free' rather than reserved for wealthier subscriptions. Taylor's strong reformation convictions about images left the building with the striking patterned stained glass, each window of which contains a precept or promise of Scripture. The large central arch is decorated with the words of Psalm 122: 'I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go to the house of the Lord'. These words aim to celebrate a place set aside for the community of Christ's people and the preaching of the word of God. The whole building resonates with the words inscribed in Greek in the vestry window: *ἔχετε πιστιν θεου*, have faith in God'.

The aim of this campaign is to keep our buildings open and fit for purpose. We are seeking to raise enough money to restore the spire and bell tower properly, fix water ingress points in the church, repair interior water damage, fix the windows, improve downpipes and drainage around the church to prevent further damage. High level estimates put the pressing work on the spire and bell tower at \$1.3m. We estimate that we need to raise \$2–2.5m in total.

Please consider helping to give St Stephen's another 150 years of gospel ministry.

All donations are tax deductible, through the National Trust. For further information or discussion, please contact Andrew Errington, current rector of NEAC:

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ⁱ St Stephen's Newtown, Diamond Jubilee booklet, 1934.

ⁱⁱ <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/taylor-robert-4694>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Stephen%27s_Anglican_Church_Newtown