

MESSAGE FROM 10th OCTOBER 2020

My Dear Friends,

It has been such a long time since I was last able to write to you! Most of you will be aware of the reasons for my times of absence from life at St Stephen's during the summer months – the death of Ruthie and Heather's Grandma, and my dear friend, Margaret came at an already difficult time, due to Heather's health and lockdown. Over the summer months Heather has had 7 hospital stays and several invasive treatments for heart problems – the latest of these at Freeman Hospital in Newcastle upon Tyne. Sadly, the treatments have not been successful. Although things are stable as I write this, none of us knows for how long. I can only ask for your continuing prayer and support until the way becomes clearer. It's in God's hands

Throughout my ministry at St S's I have been blessed with an excellent Session Clerk, Kirk Session and Congregational Board, as well as a most loving and caring congregation. Never has the expression "church family" been more apt! However, in these last four or five months, our church family has excelled itself. The care that has been shown towards one another, and to those around us, has been exceptional. I have heard so many stories of folk helping each other out in these difficult times. It is heart-warming to see the love that is shared in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Of course, this sharing has been extended beyond the limits of our congregation and has spilled out into our community in the North East, throughout the UK and across the world to Hong Kong, Indonesia and USA!! Several new people have attached themselves to our congregation and we extend to them a very warm welcome. We very much hope that there will be an opportunity for those of you who live locally to join us in some form of fellowship in the not too distant future.

ALL ARE WELCOME IN THIS PLACE

It was with great sadness that the church family learned of the very sudden death of Sue Cawood in September. Although Sue had only been at St Stephen's for a few years, she was a valued & most enthusiastic member of our Guild and other activities as well as a dear friend to many. Sue's bubbly personality and sense of fun will be greatly missed by all. Our sympathies are with Sue's family.

CHURCH RE-OPENED FOR PRIVATE PRAYER ONLY

As you may be aware, our church building has been opening for private prayer recently. Our grateful thanks must go in particular to our "COVID committee", Andrew Hopwood, Graham Cooper, Alan Wood, and Ian Sutherland, as well as Helen Hopwood and Ronnie Milne for all their hard work in making sure all safety measures are in place and guidelines adhered to. A great big "Thank You!" also goes to Helen and Andrew Hopwood and to Jen Dalmaine and Nancy Rae for taking on responsibility for the actual prayer times, and to those who have volunteered to help with door duty etc. Remember, if you want to attend any of these times of prayer **you must register in advance for each session you want to attend** by contacting Ian Sutherland. All safety guidelines set by the government and by the Church of Scotland are in place to help keep you safe. Please, please, do not come to church if you have **any** symptoms of COVID19.

ONLINE WORSHIP

I must commend all who have been involved in our on-line services. They are regularly taking the message to all who are able to tune in. Our organist, Callum Massie has been a leading light in this venture and we owe him a huge debt of thanks for all he has done, and continues to do, to keep St Stephen's online. Heartfelt thanks must go too to Ian and Shirley Sutherland and to Amy Bender for the huge contributions they are making in leading our services online, especially in my absence. Thanks also to the many people who join in leading prayers, readings and reflections and all our musicians/singers.

FOODBANK COLLECTION FOR SOMEBODY CARES

Since lockdown began our collection of non-perishable foods for Somebody Cares has been on hold. However, as part of our celebration and thanksgiving for Harvest at St Stephen's Church, it would be good to re-introduce our long-established practice of sharing with others who are in need.

On Saturday 24th October 2020 it is my intention to be at the front door of the church between 2pm and 3pm with our usual shopping trolley to collect donations for the Somebody Cares Foodbank. If you are able, please come along to the church building with your donation, in a carrier bag, and add it to the trolley.

The church will not be accessible – we will remain outside – however, while on church grounds, we must still maintain the rules of Social Distancing and, for those who can, masks. Remember, it's our Church Family and friends we are protecting, many of whom are elderly.

If you are unable to come to the church with your donation (perhaps your health prevents you coming or you would require transport) **please give me a call on 07719 664293** and I will arrange for your donation to be picked up from your home. Social Distancing will be maintained and masks worn for your protection.

I then hope to return to having a **monthly collection** on the doorstep, COVID permitting. Look out for further details

Our building may be mostly closed – but our church, the people who are essential in sharing the love of Jesus Christ, is very much open, alive and well. For now, we must content ourselves that things cannot be as we would like them to be. We all miss the close fellowship we normally enjoy – but, by sticking to the rules and with God's help we will get through this! Not only will we survive – we will grow through the lessons we have learned and our faithfulness will reap its reward.

In the words of our closing hymn this Harvest Sunday – “Through the love of God, our Saviour, all will be well.”

Yours, in His Service,
Maggie