

Rob Bailey is heavily involved in the Iranian Ministry at Stockton Parish Church where outstanding work is being done with this dispossessed community. We have been able to assist in some small ways by sending furniture and household items to help these people to establish homes in Stockton but Rob is most grateful for our prayers and asks that we continue to pray for their work.

### **Iranian Ministry Report March 2016**

God is continuing to work powerfully through Farsi speakers in Stockton. Almost every week we see new faces in our congregation as people arrive in Teesside and receive personal invitations to SPC (a great form of personal evangelism). As well as our regular Sunday services we invite these folks to our Farsi worship service each Thursday evening. This is a unique service which offers Farsi speakers (Kurds and Afghans as well as Iranians) the opportunity to worship, pray, hear the bible read and preached in their mother tongue. The leadership team and the musical worship team are members of SPC however the meeting is open to all Farsi speakers who wish to attend regardless of their church membership. In practice about 90% of those attending are SPC members. As the year has progressed the numbers have increased to a point where meeting in the church hall wasn't viable and for the last few months each meeting has taken place in the main church building. Attendance figures for the last few months have been around 80+ each evening.

During the year we have seen great growth; not only numerically but also spiritually. Two of our members (Morad and Mohsen Karimi) were given the opportunity (at no cost to SPC) to spend 3 months at Elam headquarters near Guildford taking part in their intensive leadership training course. This has been of tremendous benefit not only to Morad and Mohsen but also to SPC.

We also run regular 4-session baptism preparation courses which, as well as delivering foundational Christian teaching, give us a further opportunity to form basic assessments of the Christian character of those invited. Our records tell us that we have baptised 61 Farsi speakers this year so there will have been more than a few parties in heaven!

*Rob Bailey*

### **Then... Now... And beyond**

St. Mary's Church has served the village of Longnewton for centuries. Over the years, a loyal core of brave parishioners were willing to brace themselves against the icy conditions in the draughty choir stalls each Sunday morning. Despite a Church School in the village, the emphasis was not on children in the church, but adults. Added to this was the demise of children's communal activities in the village, all of which culminated in the monthly family service disappearing and with it many families. For the majority of the past two decades the focus of the church has been to grow the congregation; and the last five years to grow children's ministry in particular.

'Swelling the ranks' of the loyal few was a difficult job but slowly and steadily the numbers grew. This was mainly thanks to the redesign of the inside of the church. Out went the fixed, hard, dark, wooden pews; in came moveable, versatile, softer, more comfortable chairs. Out went the draughty vestry, squashed in behind the organ; in came a plumbed kitchen area, glass vestry and toilets. Out went the dark dingy cobwebby corners; in came spotlights and a new lightwood floor. The introduction of these creature comforts paved the way for the members of the congregation to come trickling back.

With the growth in congregation came a growth in the ministry. With more regular worshippers, there was a bigger call for participation in the services. Supported by All Saints, St Mary's grew a small but

effective lay ministry team. Over the last decade this team has grown beyond all recognition. Weekly services now see a wide variety of styles, and attendees will rarely see the same face at the front from one day to the next. This has meant that various worships and services have evolved to fit the diverse needs of its congregation. From Sunday Services, Tuesday at Ten, Home Groups, Alpha Courses and Thursday Drop In, to Messy Church, GodZone, Little Ted and Children's' Ministry on a Sunday, our church now really does cater for all. The building is now being used for different congregations on different days. No longer is it Sunday-only, one-size-fits-all worship.

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> April was the APCM. Following on from last years' format the meeting was held on a Sunday morning, blended with a Service of the Word. The meeting is held to inform parishioners about what has happened in the church over the last year and to give people an opportunity to ask questions, or indeed impart information, in a receptive and welcoming forum. Reports were distributed prior to the meeting via email and hardcopies were available on the day. Each separate strand of St. Mary's is offered the opportunity to submit a report and to that end Sunday saw the full range of ministry that St. Mary's has achieved since last April. For those who weren't there, topics were covered such as the Election of Church Wardens and PCC members, reports from Communications Group, the Pastoral Group and the Worship Committee (to name but a few) as well as the singing of hymns, offering of prayers and a talk from Rev. John Lambert entitled 'Ifs and Buts'.

One thing that the meeting certainly succeeded in doing was highlighting the differences between where the church was 20 years ago, and where it is now. And the difference is quite simply staggering. Numbers attending Sunday Services regularly exceed 40, and within that number is a core group of children. Services are now projected on to a screen for ease of participation. Hymns are varied and are a thorough mix of traditional and modern. Sundays now contain dedicated activities for children including DVD's linked to that day's theme, arts, crafts (much of it edible!) and some small active participation in the service. Prayer is offered in the Chapel at the end of Sunday worship. Refreshments are served after every service. Our welcome is warm and friendly and anyone attending for the first time is welcomed as an old friend we are thrilled to see again. In short, St. Mary's is now a church where people want to attend, want to stay behind and want to see thrive. It has become a community.

So, where does this leave us? Taking into account that Messy Church can often have 25-30 children attending, the future of our church is looking healthier. After all, you can only return to church if you have been there before. But there is a way to go. We must not become complacent. As a community we are focussed, and will remain so, on the growth of our congregation and of our congregation's faith; and the continued growth of children's ministry. To that end, there are already plans in the pipeline. We have a dedicated children's team on Sunday mornings, various children's groups throughout the month, a dedicated safeguarding officer, a new heating system is being discussed, various new programmes are planned, a new notice board is under discussion, banners are in production (look for them; they'll be hard to miss) and much, much more. In short, the future looks promising. Who knows where St. Mary's will be in another 20 years time? One thing's for sure, at this rate it will defiantly still be thriving.

*Ian Palmer-Jones*

*The latest programme planned is Puzzling Questions, starting on the 19<sup>th</sup> April – a series which looks to explore some of the more puzzling questions around life in general, whilst participants eat cheese and drink good wine. Do join in – it will be held in the Wilson Centre starting at 7 pm.*