

Immanuel United Reformed Church, Swindon

An Active Pastorate Profile

*Adopted by the Church Meeting on November 5th 2017
together with the Vision Statement which follows*

Although Immanuel's roots lie in 19th century Swindon and the little Independent Chapel that was founded in 1804, the current building, now on an entirely different site, opened its doors for worship ten days after the declaration of war in 1939: it seats up to 300, mostly in traditional pews.



Its red brick exterior is not perhaps its best selling point, but once inside, visitors are often surprised that the worship area is remarkably light, attractive and well-appointed and even 'modern for its age'. Work on the rear premises a few years ago has turned a somewhat dreary institutional corridor with meeting rooms into a far more attractive light and airy meeting venue. A fifteen minute walk from the town centre and with a large car-park to the side and pleasant lawned garden to the rear, the church is situated in the very clearly defined and sought-after residential area of Old Walcot. The building is situated on a bus route (with a stop immediately outside) and has a secondary school

and several primary schools, as well as one of the town's F.E. colleges, all within a half-mile radius.

Within the area of Old Walcot, consisting largely of some 1500 mostly pre-war homes, there is no community centre, therefore, since its opening, Immanuel has served to some extent in that capacity and many residents see it as the local 'parish church'.

In recent years, as with many URC churches, our membership has steadily declined and now we have some 123 members and about 50 regular associates. New members joining us each year are in single figures, of whom some have come through the Partnership confirmation course (in 2017 only one person), the others by transfer from other churches.

Our congregation has drawn not only from other United Reformed Churches, but from a variety of other denominations including former members of Anglican, Methodist, Church of Scotland, Salvation Army, and Pentecostal churches.



How we are organised

As with all United Reformed Churches, the Church Meeting is central to the life and running of the church. All full members of the church have a right to vote at the meeting and although we welcome associates to attend, they do not have that right to vote on formal decisions. The Church meeting is normally held six times a year and is held in the Church Hall at the close of a morning service. Its chairman is the minister (though on occasion the secretary or other elder has taken this role) and minutes of meetings are posted on internal noticeboards to aid communication. Over the course of a year, the meeting receives reports from all church groups and committees including Young Immanuel. The agenda tends to be set from business stemming from the Elders' meeting.

The Elders meet formally each month (except in January and August) and, whilst at times there seems to be a huge agenda to get through, they nevertheless welcome suggestions on any issues that the congregation would like to be addressed. Together with the minister who chairs them, they try to work very much as a team and the many areas of responsibility are shared between them all. The elders' meeting agenda always reviews pastoral concerns (see section on Pastoral care) and reviews items that may have arisen from the Church Meeting. In addition they receive items from the meetings of the church's main committees (see below), or which they receive from other sources - Synod, Old Town Partnership Council, Churches Together et al.

Currently there are thirteen serving Elders (three short of our desired number of sixteen) who are elected by the church meeting and who serve for a three-year appointment (which can be repeated before a mandatory 'rest year'). The congregation is asked to support them in every way possible. The many and various duties of the secretary have been reviewed so that some can be shared among the Elders in order that the Secretary is not burdened with too many extra responsibilities. The Eldership is very grateful for the help and support of non-serving Elders in fulfilling various tasks and, in particular, in continuing to share in the pastoral care of our members and associates. The serving Elders work hard to maintain the smooth running of the church - its worship, activities and care of the premises as well as its mission and outreach into the local community and the wider world. On a rota basis, Elders also act as minister's chaplain on Sundays, attending the minister before services, ensuring that readers for the day are briefed and giving out notices at the start of worship.

Together with the minister, Elders represent Immanuel in the meetings of the wider church - e.g. at Synod – and all serving elders are automatically members of the Partnership Council and trustees of Immanuel.

Training days or weekend conferences are arranged from time to time to allow Elders to discuss in greater depth matters concerning the church. Many Elders also serve on one of the church's committees thus liaising between committee and church and elders' meetings.

The Church Secretary is nominated from among the Elders and agreed each year by the Church Meeting. The role of the Secretary is very much one of coordinating and acting as a conduit in circulating information, dealing with correspondence, liaising with various groups, committees and individuals as well as generally facilitating the life of the church in the light of discussions and decisions made by Church and Elders' meetings. There is good back up to the secretarial role in that there is a minutes' secretary for meetings, as well as pulpit supply secretary and bookings officer.

The church committees were created to share the weight of responsibility and leadership, remove some of the burden from the minister and the elders' meeting, and perhaps more importantly, encourage wider participation and involvement of our members. The committees are composed of volunteer members from the congregation who may have a particular interest or skill; together with one or two representatives from the eldership, they will identify their own chair person and / or secretary. There are four church committees:-

Buildings and Grounds - has oversight of all the church premises including the Manse and is responsible for maintenance and cleaning as well as security and lettings. This hard-working group has the challenge of caring for and modernising an almost 80-year-old building. The church bookings officer liaises with, and is supported by, this committee.

Finance Committee – has oversight of the church finances. The committee makes recommendations for our commitments to be met either by direct giving or by fundraising events. Regular reports are made to Elders and Church Meetings, and an annual report is made to the Charity Commissioners.

World Concerns Committee – acts as a ‘ginger group’ to raise awareness of injustice and poverty worldwide. As a church we support homeless projects in the town and Amnesty International, Fairtrade and Christian Aid, as well as other agencies. Over many years, our annual Harvest Appeals have sponsored projects globally.

Worship and Outreach Group – together with the Minister, its brief is to review liturgy, music, and styles of worship, and when applicable, to suggest changes of format and introduce variety. The Pulpit supply secretary is a member of this group. In terms of outreach they continually seek ways of spreading the love of Jesus within our church buildings, to those who use them, as well as to the local area, and see as our primary 'target' the locality of Old Walcot.

Communications: Immanuel produces a weekly news sheet that carries family news and church notices, and many members receive this directly each week as an email attachment. We have our own church Website, (www.immanuelurc.co.uk) with links with the local partnership of churches and the wider URC. We see this as an area of increasing scope and opportunity. We also share in the publication of a monthly Partnership Magazine, with contributions being written by various people of all the constituent congregations. Although there is no official secretarial support for a minister, a number of people within the church are able to offer word processing and administration skills, though the present minister is fully computer literate.

Church Life

"Sharing the Love of Jesus, Serving the Community"

As our 'strap line' declares: our primary aim as a church is to preach the gospel and so Immanuel's primary function is to be a worship centre, a place where we can give glory to God and where we can recharge our batteries for our own Christian journey.

Services that enable us to do this take place throughout the year both in the morning and evening. Although we are in a shared pastorate with the URC in Highworth our minister continues to conduct the majority of our services. Immanuel is a church that welcomes variety in leadership of worship and, although our services tend to be quite traditional in format, the content within this framework can be very varied and thought-provoking. We have a pulpit supply secretary who, when the minister is unavailable, ensures a steady stream of leaders both ordained and lay, (including the contribution made by the ecumenical leaders in our partnership) as well as many others who willingly accept the invitation to lead our worship.

Immanuel has a long tradition of being liberal in its theology, and a number of members subscribe to 'Free to Believe' or the Progressive Christianity Network (PCN). However, there are members who are more evangelical in their theology and thus we are probably best described as being 'a broad church'.

Although we tend to have a fairly fixed pattern of worship, the minister or leader is responsible for structuring the services each week - though the Worship and Outreach committee may well help determine to some extent various themes or ideas. For many years the Lessons each Sunday have been read by members of the congregation and

there is a lengthy list of volunteers; a recent change is that members are being encouraged to lead prayers of intercession during morning worship.

One of the church 'transepts' has been set aside as a prayer corner and members and friends are encouraged to use this during the week as an area for private devotion. As well as our Amnesty Candle, a 'prayer candle' burns there to aid concentration and help focus thought.

Over the past year numerous different styles of worship have occurred: a Songs of Praise service, a Summer Sing-along, Carols by Daylight as well as Carols by Candlelight, Health and Wholeness services, a Taizé service, a "Pause for Thought" prior to Christmas, and, for the second time, a Christingle Service in January proved very popular. In November each year we host a service organised by the A.E. Smith Funeral Service, when a usually packed church is invited to light candles in memory of loved ones lost during the year. Immanuel also holds its own similar memorial service "In Loving Memory", on the evening of remembrance Sunday.

In addition we have recently introduced a regular 'Hymns and Tea service' (now called simply "The Tea Service") on a Sunday afternoon every other month to replace the normal evening service. It is proving very popular and attracting new faces to the church.

The increasingly popular "Carols in the Car-park" continues to attract very large numbers in the run-up to Christmas and because it has invariably been held indoors (despite its name), a decision has been taken to change its name to "Carols on the Carpet"!



In terms of inclusivity, every effort is made to be mindful of those who may have particular needs: the church has an effective hearing loop system, has wheel chair access and we have recently re-positioned pews so that wheel chair users are no longer obliged to sit in an aisle; large print hymn books are available. In addition we have introduced a simple guide to our service which is available to newcomers and includes the words of the Grace and the Lord's Prayer.

Although we no longer offer formal Sunday school classes, younger children are catered for with an 'activities table' and / or 'activity bag' in the Chapel (at the entrance to the worship area). A DBS verified adult sits with the children and will sensitively lead/interact with them if they feel it is welcomed by the children. The church is happy for children to take part in communion services provided parents and minister are happy and feel the child has an understanding of the service.

Attendance at services has remained fairly constant throughout the year, averaging about 90 in the mornings and 14-18 at our evening services, now generally held in the lounge area (Atrium) in the entrance to the rear premises, rather than in the sanctuary of the church. These evening services are very informal and often include a time of Bible study, discussion and reflection. Evening services are held in the church on special occasions and/or when numbers are considerably more – the Memorial Service on Remembrance Day, Lessons and Carols by Candlelight, Harvest Sunday and united Partnership services. The Darkness to Light Advent Sunday evening service last year and the Passion Sunday evening service this year, which took the form of a performance of Stainer's "Crucifixion" by the joint choirs of our partnership, were both partnership services and were held at Immanuel.

During the month of August, evening services throughout the partnership are shared so that only one service is held at Immanuel, the others being held in the other Partnership churches.

Although often seen as the local 'parish church' in Old Walcot, we have seen a dramatic reduction in the number of weddings and baptisms held at the church but when a request is made for a baptism, the minister will meet with the parent(s) to discuss the full implications and will offer a service of blessing if it is felt more appropriate to the family's position.

Immanuel is proud of its strong tradition of good music in the church. We are fortunate in having an excellent choirmaster and organist, but it is increasingly difficult to find people able to deputise on the organ. That said, a few of the congregation are able and willing to provide piano accompaniment when the organist is unavailable.

The church pipe organ, is well maintained and in good condition, having been completely rebuilt in 2004. The pianos throughout the building are in good order and an electric piano is often used in worship to accompany some of the more contemporary music.

Immanuel continues to maintain a good four-part robed choir of 25 singers with a wide repertoire of church music. On average there are 16 or 17 singing at the morning services. The choir also enhances several special evening services throughout the year.

The hymnbooks we use illustrate the breadth of musical style we attempt to incorporate in worship: Rejoice and Sing, Sing Praise and Mission Praise 1. We have a second edition of our own Worship Book including songs used in our local primary schools plus other hymns and songs used through CCLI.

In a recent survey taken across the congregation 96% of responses rated worship as "acceptable, good or very good" in terms of the nature and standard of worship at Immanuel.

The pastoral side of Immanuel's church life is very important: each elder has pastoral responsibility for a list of 10 or 12 members and associates (though the secretary and treasurer have reduced lists), so that each member and associate is allocated to an Elder. In addition a number of volunteer visitors (often non-serving Elders) help to lighten the load for the elders and there is ongoing discussion about ways of sharing pastoral responsibility more widely in the congregation.

Pastoral concern for members is raised at the start of every Elder's meeting and family news is shared at the start of every Church Meeting. Pastoral lists are reviewed annually by the Elders and there is on-going discussion as to how

best to keep members informed and to encourage attendance at Church Meetings. Other discussions have taken place over the past year over data protection issues and we are conscious of the need to protect identity data.

The Minister and Elders rely on all members of the congregation to keep them informed of people who need our prayers on occasions of joy and sadness, but in particular two church members do a great deal to keep the Church in touch with those no longer able to take an active part in the life of Immanuel but who are still remembered and prayed for. They ensure that cards and small token presents are distributed at Christmas and Easter. Included in this, we also have several teams involved in the provision, arranging and then distribution of church flowers each week - these normally go out to those who are ill or housebound and ensure a fairly frequent visit.

Immanuel's own prayer group regularly prays for those in the congregation who are in need of support.

The church also runs a 'recorded service' scheme whereby morning services are made available on CD to the housebound or others who might appreciate it; again this offers a point of contact and a real opportunity to show the care and concern of the church.

It has to be admitted that Immanuel has not been good in taking up opportunities for training in pastoral care which have been on offer via the synod, but on occasion there have been 'in-house' meetings offering advice and training.

We have a Safeguarding Young People and Vulnerable Adults Policy that is reviewed regularly and we try to ensure that those who might come under this category are included in the pastoral lists. The minister too is on a pastoral list, and as an eldership and congregation we try to be as caring as possible, recognising that his role can be not only demanding but stressful.

Immanuel's congregation is quick to spot newcomers and welcome them - a vital first step in establishing pastoral care!

We have a good relationship with neighbouring sheltered accommodation. Booker House was built on land sold by Immanuel to the then "Church Army" and for many years it housed elderly people from the neighbourhood who wanted to remain in the locality. Now it is home to people with learning difficulties but who lead independent lives. We consider it a real blessing that through our pastoral care and the friendship we offer, a number of these folk have become members of Immanuel and the "Thursday Club" has been formed to offer them specific worship opportunities suited to their needs - both spiritually and socially.

Each year we add new names to our Memorial Book, which is one way of remembering past members, friends and those who have had an association with Immanuel over the years. Recently bereaved families have really appreciated being able to have their loved ones' name entered into this book which is kept in a case in the Prayer Corner in the church and the pages turned each day.

Of all the areas in Immanuel's life, that of youth and children's work is the one which causes most concern in Elders' and Church meetings: there are now only two or three young children who occasionally come with their families to the morning service, and a similar number of young people. The younger children tend to sit with their family in the church for the first part of the service and then go into the chapel for table top activities rather than formal 'lessons', The older 'youngsters' still generally meet on the rear premises with a leader. It is heartening to see that although few in number our FURY group makes its contribution to the life of Immanuel - offering support for Junior Church newcomers, contributing to the partnership prayer diary, sometimes working the 'sound desk' as part of the rota of volunteers and, on occasions, helping to lead worship.

All those involved with youth and children's work are covered by DBS checks as a matter of church policy and the church has a Child Protection Officer. The staff, together with the rest of the church, put a high priority on the children's needs and safety.

Church meeting continues to receive an annual report from the co-ordinator on Children's and Youth Work, and the topic features regularly on Elders' and church meeting agendas.

Despite the virtual absence of children from our services, Immanuel is fully involved in the partnership "Messy Church" that takes place on a monthly basis and is attracting fairly large numbers of children together with mums and dads. We recognize the support given by many of our own congregation in terms of leadership and running this venture. Meeting off-site in a local school once a month on a Sunday afternoon, Messy Church currently caters only for younger children and ways of involving older children in a similar venture are being considered. It is perhaps indicative of the value we place on Messy Church that our church meeting recently agreed that a £200 subsidy should be given, in addition to the funds it receives directly from our ecumenical partnership.

Wherever possible the young people are encouraged to be involved in meetings and decision-making and their ideas and suggestions are as valued as those of any member or associate.

Unlike some churches, Immanuel does not have a policy on children being received into membership but one of our young people (16 year-old) recently went through our ecumenical training scheme and was confirmed at the last Partnership confirmation service and is now a full church member.

Currently there are no formal links with local schools. On the plus side, however, a recent project which involved Immanuel was "Easter Cracked", an event that was organised across the partnership: just prior to Easter and in two sessions, Immanuel welcomed more than 50 children from a local primary school.



The children first went into the worship area where they followed the story of Easter from Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to His resurrection on Easter Day – through video, story-telling and re-enactment (processing round the church with real palms was fun!) This was interspersed with writing and creative art work in the church hall, giving the children a record of the experience in the form of a booklet which they were able to take away with them. The exercise was warmly appreciated by the school staff who were impressed with the thorough preparation and organisation.

Our Cradle Roll Secretary maintains regular contact with those bringing children for baptism/blessing, though these numbers are increasingly few. Crèche facilities during the service can be available every Sunday morning, and we are delighted on the rare occasions it is required.

In terms of uniformed organisations, the Brownie pack continues to thrive and meets weekly during term time, but their links with the church are few, despite attempts by the church to organise parade services, the Brownie leaders have shown a marked lack of enthusiasm to be involved. Sadly the Guide Troop that did meet at Immanuel has now combined with another nearby group and meets elsewhere.

We have always liked to think of ourselves as a 'welcoming church' and there were many positive comments substantiating that view from members and associates in our recent questionnaire. Members of the congregation take it in turns to act as 'welcomers' to morning services and ensure that no-one can creep in without a friendly word of welcome and a news-sheet! As mentioned elsewhere the church sanctuary (as well as the main hall) is equipped with a hearing loop and there is good ramped access to all parts of the premises. A wheelchair lift facilitates access between the sanctuary and the rear premises and there are excellent toilet facilities for the disabled as well as for baby-changing. Large-print hymn books are available. Certainly the refurbished entry to the rear premises has enhanced the welcome and presents a warm, inviting atmosphere which is much appreciated by everyone.

Our 'Worship and Outreach' committee regularly reviews the church welcoming leaflet so that information is up-to-date and easily available to any visitor to a service or to a meeting in our ancillary rooms. The committee has also drawn up a useful guide to our morning service so that any visitor understands when and why we stand at various points as well as guiding them through our 'liturgy'. Over the past few years we have organized some excellent professionally produced fliers and posters to offer a welcome to specific events in the church calendar; sometimes (as at Christmas) these are distributed round the whole neighbourhood as well as among our own membership.

The Elders and Church Meeting worked through much of the Radical Welcome material that was circulated some few years ago and was disappointed that the whole scheme was dropped from the national URC programme.

Currently the church has not undertaken any work on the inclusion of registered sex offenders nor has it organised a communications audit - though the whole subject of communications features regularly on the agenda of the Church Worship and Outreach Committee.

On the matter of LGBT issues the church has yet to discuss the subject of Civil Partnership Blessing or Same Sex Marriage, although some years ago we did vote in favour of the acceptance of gay clergy.

Although we have not done so for some years, from time to time the church has organised a "Newcomers Evening" to offer a welcome to new associates and members, to get to know them in a more social setting than after the service on a Sunday and to answer questions they might have about Immanuel.

For some eighteen months we have adopted an 'Open Door Scheme' by opening the church up on a number of occasions for anyone to come in and pray or just sit. Although numbers have not been huge, Elders feel it is worth continuing and we hope that together with some planned events, we can open the church up if there are particular events worldwide that cause distress and heartache. A recent opportunity came following the tragic fire in North Kensington, London, when the doors were opened for those who wanted to find a few moments of calm to reflect and pray.

Immanuel is generally a hive of activity and the times when there is no-one using the premises during the day and evening are very rare.

Further Church activities:

Prayer Group

This group meets twice monthly to pray for Immanuel, its life, its members and associates as well as for wider issues in the town and the world. It is good to know that numbers attending have increased in the past year and the creation of a prayer corner in the former Children's Corner is a real asset that underlines in a very visual way the importance of prayer in the life of Immanuel; the prayer candle is now lit during services and sometimes intercessory prayers said from that corner.

Church Choir

The choir meets to rehearse weekly on a Friday evening throughout the year although it does take a break during August. As mentioned earlier there are some 25 members and an average of attendance on Sundays of 16/17. For



special services sometimes additional singers are co-opted in to boost the numbers, and several singers from the Anglican Church join us once a month when they are not required at Christ Church.

Thursday Fellowship

A fellowship group for those with learning difficulties was formed several years ago when there was an change of occupancy in the adjoining sheltered accommodation, Booker House. It is very pleasing to record how successful this group became in terms of growing numbers and enthusiasm. This fairly dynamic fellowship is

supported by several Immanuel members. They meet for worship in their own distinctive style and have a range of more social activities - often involving a meal of some form or another. Two or three of this group are now integrated into our fellowship and have found their own niche.

Women's Fellowship

This organisation continues to be well supported by church members but its membership also includes many who are not regular church goers - there is a healthy representation of ladies from the local neighbourhood. There is an excellent atmosphere and an interesting programme of activities, trips, speakers and members' afternoons.

Dramatic Society

Like the Women's fellowship the Dramatic Society is not an organisation restricted to church folk, indeed a large percentage have no link with Immanuel. It is heartening however to see these people involved not only in productions on stage at Immanuel but also in using their acting skills in concerts that the society performs in sheltered accommodation around the town and in an annual religious play or series of sketches in the church.

Social Club

This club continues to meet on Wednesday evenings, mostly as a badminton club, and has attracted members of our partnership churches as well as friends from outside the church fellowship. On the same evening, a small number of folk meet for table games and a natter.

Ten o'clock Club

Thursday mornings sees a group of dedicated badminton players who also find time for a cup of tea or coffee and a chat in between their games. They have an organised crèche so that the young mums can join in the fun on the badminton court.

Retired Folks Badminton

These players of more mature years (55+) meet on a Thursday afternoon and although they may not move as swiftly as those in the Wednesday night group they still enjoy a lively game or two – and a cheery cuppa at half-time!

New members are always welcome to any of these activity groups





Lunch Club

Although not formally a church organisation, the lunch club continues to function week by week on a Tuesday, providing a hot meal to some 30+ people, many of whom have no direct link with Immanuel. This is yet another way in which the church is serving and reaching out into the community. Nearly all the volunteers who prepare and serve the meals are church members or associates. They work in teams and each team is on duty once a month.

(Above: a hearty meal every week in good company)

Uniformed Organisations

Similarly the Brownies are not strictly a church group but continue to meet on Mondays and judging by the noise emanating from their meeting rooms, a good time is had by all. Very few of the members are linked with the church but we endeavour to involve them in the life of Immanuel as much as possible. Sadly the Guides no longer meet on our premises as they have joined with another group elsewhere in the town.

Our Worship and Outreach committee works hard to advertise church activities and events and the web-site is updated twice weekly and also includes reports and photos of recent events at Immanuel. Depending on the time of year, it is very evident that the site is appreciated as we receive as many as 200+ 'hits' per month and rarely does this drop below 150.

Outreach activities are appreciated by the congregation as a whole and it is perhaps significant that that in the run-up to Christmas there were plenty of volunteers to distribute round the local neighbourhood the 1000 invitations to the Christmas events being planned at Immanuel.

Although, as already said, our primary function is as a place of worship, Immanuel is also very much seen as a community building where many groups and organisations regularly meet and make use of our excellent premises. Many of the activities that take place at Immanuel are church based (see above) but many are not.

To name just a few: up to four community choirs come to practice on our premises, children come for after-school learning, people come to give blood, dancers dance, actors act, people party and others 'face the music' as they sit their Associated Board exams - Immanuel is the local centre for the Associated Board of Music exams so over a period of two to five weeks each school term, a large number of pupils, parents and teachers enter our premises. The Royal Academy of Dance examinations are also held on the premises and it is the polling station for local and national elections and so Immanuel is a very well known building in the town

The buildings are frequently rented out for private parties (our catering facilities are good it seems) and we are very well-known in the town as a concert venue - both the church Hall and the Sanctuary being excellent in terms of seating and acoustics. For example the annual visit of the Aldbourn Band (now coming up to its 54th visit) will see a completely packed church to hear this premier league band play.

Our Booking Secretary deals very efficiently with dozens of requests to use the buildings and this gives us not only increased income from letting fees, but also the opportunity to make contact with potential church friends (and who

knows, members). Recent regular bookings over and above those mentioned already, include groups from the University of the 3rd Age, Yoga sessions, and a Salsa group. Mention has already been made of the many dance classes that are held each week, and this means that a large number of parents cross the threshold on a weekly basis to bring their children or wait to pick them up. For a number of years we have hosted sessions organised by "Music Bugs" by which babies and toddlers are introduced to music in both passive and active ways!

In addition Immanuel also hosts the Annual Pantomime performed by the Dramatic Society in conjunction with the Dance School and they see in excess of 800 people attending shows during the ten days of the Panto season in January.

Until recently one of the local councillors used the premises as his 'surgery' on a bi-monthly basis thus encouraging others to cross the threshold.

A fairly recent development has been the use of both sanctuary and rear premises by a group of Romanian Christians. Formerly they travelled to Bristol or London to worship in their own tongue, but now, having found Immanuel, they are delighted to use our premises several times a week for worship and Bible study as well as occasional social events. They have been so pleased with the welcome they have found that they have now officially named themselves "Immanuel Romanian Pentecostal Church" and plans are in hand to share worship from time to time.

On occasion we have tried to include these all our groups in the life of the church - for example on our 75th anniversary weekend we encouraged all users to put on a display of their activities in the church hall but it has to be said that our communication with these groups is not as effective as perhaps it might be.

All of this means that we see a steady footfall each week (frequently more than 1000 children and adults come on to the premises each week) and while lettings do increase our finances, we need to put some thought into establishing links with these groups.

For a period of some two years a group of volunteers organised a weekly Saturday morning coffee session so that parents waiting for young children in dancing classes could sit and enjoy refreshments. Practicalities now mean that this is likely to happen less frequently but we still look for ways to serve the visitors to our buildings.

It would be impossible to calculate the numbers involved in all the activities that take place in any one week at Immanuel but a glance at the range of groups and activities shows that the building welcomes infants in arms right through to those well into their 90s!

It is very clear from all this that, despite a setting of declining numbers both nationally and in the local scene, as well as the dramatic shortage of children and young people, we have ample opportunity for growth

In the past five years much has changed at Immanuel in that the enhanced premises have made our buildings far more visually attractive and 'open' and we have become more aware of the need to welcome; as has been shown above, there has been marked increase in the use of the building by outside groups and lettings (with the consequential impact of logistical issues such as cleaning and caretaking). On the negative side we have seen the drastic loss of our children and young people and the age profile is ever moving upwards!

Both the Elders' and Church Meetings have fully endorsed and supported ideas stemming initially from the Worship and Outreach Group that have seen the introduction of new patterns of worship (Tea Services, Songs of Praise, Sing-alongs, Christingle, Remembrance Services, Wholeness and Health Services as well as the annual "Carols on the Carpet" event) - all popular in their own way -and firmly believe they are ways of promoting growth.



Church groups are 'open' to the local community and we see tremendous scope for outreach and growth in Women's Fellowship, the Dramatic Society as well as the Luncheon Club and others ; these and other activities on the premises offer an enrichment opportunity not just for church members and associates but for the wider locality.

(Left: time for tea during the Tea Service)

As yet the Worship and Outreach Group has not been able to act as a PR coordinator but, if the right person can be identified, there is a very important role for them at

Immanuel. That committee is very conscious that we do little to promote Immanuel in the media where the 'awareness of the church' is scant.

"One in Christ, Together in Mission"

The strap line of the Swindon Old Town Partnership of Churches makes our stance clear when it comes to being church with others. Since 1969 we have formally been in an ecumenical partnership and Immanuel benefits immensely from being a member of the partnership working together with Bath Road Methodist Church and Christ Church with St Mary's Anglican Churches. Ideally we do nothing separately that can be done better together. Each church is large and active, retaining its own buildings, administration and activities.

The Partnership, one of the first ecumenical parishes to be established in the country as early as 1969, is organised and administered by a Focus Group and Partnership Council composed of representatives of all three churches. Although there have been council chairmen appointed from among the clergy, we encourage each church in turn to provide a chairman who is lay and who will hold office for three years. Ministers have all come to enjoy the regular 'clergy breakfasts' or lunches during which members of the partnership deepen their fellowship at the same time as sharing common concerns and issues. During vacancies at Immanuel over the past 48 years our church secretary or other elder has been made very welcome at these meetings. There really is an excellent relationship between the constituent churches and the leaders as well as members of the congregation.

Throughout the year there are joint services (in the tradition of the host church) as well as specially arranged ecumenical services organised by the team; in addition there are Partnership pulpit exchanges confirming the mutual recognition of clergy and encouraging familiarity with different styles of worship. In particular, evening services throughout August in the partnership are occasions for joint worship. Other occasions marked by joint services come in January during the week of prayer for Christian Unity, at Pentecost (when we celebrate our partnership birthday) and Advent Sunday. Then there are the joint evening services in the run-up to Easter - a Maundy Agape supper, a three-hour vigil every year at Christ Church on Good Friday and sometimes a special Good Friday Evening service. For those who can manage to cope with an early morning, an Easter morning joint 'sunrise' service is held in the ruins of the Old parish church of Holy Rood in the Lawns Park.

For many of these services all three churches are involved in planning and conducting and there are times when the three church choirs come together (for example the already mentioned highly moving performance this year on Passion Sunday of Stainer's "Crucifixion")

In terms of ecumenical activities within the partnership, there are house groups that meet throughout the year but more are formed during Lent. Some years at this time as an alternative, we have held a series of lectures given by prominent church leaders or national speakers. Meeting together in one place is a welcome variation on the regular pattern of Lent Groups held in individual homes. There is a strong core of members from all four churches who support these activities.

For some 35 years there has been an annual joint course for multiple membership of all the churches, the course being led by both clergy and laity. This culminates in a Confirmation service where leaders of all three denominations together confirm and receive the candidates into membership of the Partnership; this year the service was held at Bath Rd Methodist Church.

We also enjoy working together on common projects and are constantly looking for new ways to serve the local, national and international community. In 2013 we raised over £10,000 for a Christian Aid project in the Lebanon and West Bank to provide human rights and educational opportunities for disabled people. This year we are looking closer to home and aiming to raise £6000 for a local 'Foyer' to enhance its provision and facilities for otherwise homeless youngsters in Swindon.

As mentioned elsewhere, "Messy Church" is another prime example of our working together for a common end - all three churches are fully committed to supporting this vital work with children and young people.

Having extolled the virtues of our long-established ecumenical links, it must be said that not all our members are so enthusiastic about joint services; when worship is held in other buildings, the number of URC worshippers is noticeably fewer than had it been held at Immanuel and that reluctance is also found among certain Anglican and Methodist members! That said, we continue to work as closely as we can with our partnership churches - we produce a monthly prayer diary whose preparation is shared among the three churches and there is a monthly magazine sharing news and articles from the constituent churches.

While talking of publications it would be remiss not to mention the annual radio station, "Flame FM" that is set up under the auspices of Swindon Churches Together and run ecumenically within our partnership set-up and with which a number of our members have been involved.

A further example in the partnership of our readiness to share was seen recently when Christchurch had a massive renovation programme and was closed for 8 weeks - Immanuel gladly offered its premises for those events which could not be housed in their Community Centre and at least one Anglican funeral was held in our church.

Ecumenical work does not happen without financial backing and Immanuel pulls its weight in contributing to the partnership accounts (currently £300 from each church each year).

However, our work with other churches does not end with the partnership, we do try to play our part in Swindon Churches Together, though it has to be admitted that with such strong ties in the partnership, our input into SCT is perhaps less than it might be - but we did host one of the well-attended hustings sessions organised by SCT in the run up to the recent General Election. We are grateful to our Minister who continues to 'fly the flag' for Immanuel at SCT meetings!

We do also try to involve ourselves in URC events: two 'area meetings' were well attended by Immanuel folk as well as other training sessions organised by S.W. Synod officers.

When it comes to the World Church, although Immanuel does not have any formal link with an overseas church nor any involvement in the 'Commitment for Life' programme, we do try to look further beyond the horizon and like to think we have a good 'track record' in terms of outreach to the wider world.

For some years now we have been recognised as a 'Fairtrade Church' and use Traidcraft and other fairly-traded produce for church activities and events. We have our own Traidcraft stall that sells products at church on alternate Sundays and also at other venues in the locality.



(Left: Our Traidcraft Stall in operation)

Annually, and for a considerable number of years, we see Harvest time as an occasion to raise funds for Third World or other outreach projects through a direct appeal to our member. We have had some remarkable success: over the past 30 years we have raised in excess of £100,000 in Harvest Appeals. Occasionally this fund-raising is done on a ecumenical basis across our partnership (as this year) but 2016 was a classic example when our members alone gave over £3000 to build and fit out a science laboratory for girls in Banyan Province Afghanistan. In addition, each year we reserve the percentage raised in Gift Aid from the appeal to be used for emergency causes that we know are likely to arise in the course of any year; in this way we can respond swiftly to requests in times of earthquake, flooding and other disasters.

Our World Concerns Committee continues to bring to our attention issues of major importance in our world through organising events, displays and talks.

One World Week and Fairtrade Fortnight feature in Immanuel's calendar and invariably see either a special breakfast or lunch arranged with more exotic items on the menu. When we have held a Fairtrade Coffee Morning it has been attended by a mixture of our congregation and mums and dads of the Estelle School of Dancing who share the premises on a Saturday, and is another chance to build social contact with folk who don't come to worship but who regularly use our premises. This particular event also promotes 'Fairtrade' and introduces the idea of buying fairly traded goods to a new group of customers, another way of spreading the Christian message.

As a church we do what we can to support both Christian Aid and Oxfam and this year's Christian Aid appeal (2017) raised some £2000. In addition, retiring collections at Christmas services always goes to the work of Christian Aid or Oxfam.

Immanuel has always been prepared to challenge injustice and since the 1990s we have been affiliated to Amnesty International (our 'Amnesty Candle' in the church is always lit during services as a reminder to the congregation), and letter-writing is encouraged in respect of our chosen "amnesty prisoner". In recent months, however we have had some concern over the 'lack of steer' from Amnesty and we encourage our members to go on-line to discover more about issues of social justice.

One regular event in the church calendar is a "Sleep-out" organised in the church car park and grounds by Swindon's "Threshold Link" - an agency that works with the homeless of the town: a large number of folk volunteer (including some from Immanuel) and are sponsored to sleep under the stars on a December night with only the prospect of a bacon sandwich a hot drink to rouse them in the morning!

In a similar way, over the years the church has developed links with Culvery Court (a homeless hostel in the centre of town) and donations of food, clothing and blankets are regularly collected at Immanuel for distribution there.

Although 'green' issues are raised from time to time (we recycle as much as we can) the church has yet to establish any sort of 'eco-policy' but an eco-church audit is a possibility for the future.

Stewardship of Resources

Immanuel is in a fairly healthy financial situation, for which we give thanks. But we dare not be complacent. The Elders ensure that there are regular meetings of the Finance and the Buildings and Grounds committees and both of these give regular reports to Church Meetings each time it meets.

Although the church gives a relatively small percentage of its income each year directly to charitable causes, as has been noted elsewhere, members give very generously of their money and in kind to both local and international appeals. As a church we have been happy to give over and above our contribution to the MMR fund to help support smaller churches who are less well off. Instead of the traditional "Gift Day" or Annual Bazaar,



in the past five years we have introduced a "Gift Month": March each year is a time when members are encouraged to review their financial giving and perhaps give a little extra that month. It seems to have produced better results than a standard Gift Day or Annual Bazaar. For example, this year we saw £7,800 handed in over and above the normal monthly total. With Gift Aid this rose to some £9,800. Increasing numbers of the congregation now give by standing order from their bank and most who can, Gift Aid their giving.

Immanuel also gives 'in kind': as well as collecting goods at Harvest which are shared between the Women's Refuge and the local hostel for the homeless, each month we organise a "store-cupboard Sunday" and the resulting full box of produce is delivered to the hostel or to the local Food Bank. The traditional Christmas Gift Service is another occasion when members give most generously and a huge pile of toys and other 'goodies' (as well as toiletries and other suitable items for the mums) goes off to the Women's Refuge and other deserving homes. "Operation Christmas Child" has become a popular activity in the run-up to Christmas and last year 53 shoe boxes were dispatched from Immanuel. We also give to the community in other ways - for example every month or so a team of Immanuel members and friends prepares sandwiches for distribution at the town's "Filling Station" - a Swindon-wide scheme supporting the homeless of the town.

A seemingly tireless Buildings and Grounds Committee saves the church large sums of money by carrying out a myriad of jobs around the premises and is always on the look-out for ways of saving cash. However, an area of concern that has featured frequently on agendas of the Elders' meeting is that of the shortage of volunteers and workers, and there is a genuine worry that we will be unable to find people to do jobs in and for Immanuel.....for example, it was agreed during the past year that we would hire cleaners instead of having to rely on the very small number of volunteers to clean the premises. This was first done on a three month temporary basis but a permanent contract has now been set up. With fairly extensive grounds to tend there is some worry that the grass-cutting and other work can no longer be carried out by our ageing volunteers, but on occasion, highly successful working parties have been set up.

A "How can I help?" questionnaire a few years ago found some success and it may be that this is an exercise worthy of repeating. However, given the increasing age of our congregation we are aware that the pressure is growing on the ever decreasing number of members and associates who are active, able and willing to carry on the many tasks necessary to keep the church 'in full working order'. It is, unfortunately, a problem shared by many churches today.

In conclusion:

It is very clear that at Immanuel we have much to give thanks for: the church is still a vibrant presence in the community and financially we are currently in a fairly stable position. The on-going refurbishments to our premises continue to offer us a wonderful opportunity to reach out into the community, attract more people through our doors and spread the news of the Gospel.

Although the average age of our congregation is now about 70 and rising, we are still a vibrant community with many energetic and enthusiastic members who willingly offer their services in so many areas of our church life. We also have to recognize that a good number of our members are very involved in activities and organisations in their home communities, in Swindon and beyond, thus living out the Christian message well beyond the confines of Immanuel's four-plus walls.

We are confident that, through our outreach into the community and our involvement with the Old Town Partnership of Churches, we will be able to continue to provide a very real and lively Christian presence in our local community, in Swindon and in the world. We move into the future with thanksgiving in our hearts and in the power of the Holy Spirit, knowing that God is with us, Immanuel.



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Our Vision Statement

"Sharing the Love of Jesus, Serving the Community" : this we shall endeavour to do by affirming and developing our own personal faith, understanding, and commitment, to enable us to support one another and the community in a more effective and responsible way.