



A Community of Hope

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I want to speak on the words of Paul in Philippians, 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.'

St Martin-in-the-Fields was never a normal church. Normal churches aren't built by the king. They don't attract to their broadcast services a radio audience of one-third of the nation, as St Martin's did in the early 1950s. They don't give their name to one of the most famous musical ensembles in the world. They don't house the busiest homeless day centre in the country. We're not called to be a normal church. So what are we called to be? What is all this financial detail and elected representation and endless activity about?

I believe fundamentally St Martin's is called to be a sign of hope – hope in forms of relationship, and configurations of trust, too seldom found elsewhere. We have a magnificent building, perfectly located to be a place of encounter, between humanity and God, between rich and poor, between friend and stranger, between people who can create beauty out of potential and turn sorrow into dancing, between those looking for sanctuary and those seeking to express joy. It's a place where through care, creativity and community everyone may find more than they came looking for.

Of course there are many communities where people set out in hope. And often people end up disappointed, dejected, even cynical. So St Martin's spends a lot of time healing people's difficult experiences and confounding people's stereotypes of what hope can mean. I want for a few moments to run through a few of those projections and assumptions, because the way we address those is so significant to the surprise and delight we want people to experience with us.

The first is, it's possible to be a church without being defensive and closed-minded. Jesus came that we might have life in all its glory. God made us how we each are because God wanted one like us. God made us with minds and bodies, not just with wills and souls. God wants us to live before death as well as after. The Holy Spirit works as much beyond the church as within it. We're called to be what only we can be, but to want what everyone else can have as well. These things sound obvious. But most people who worship at St Martin's have known communities where they weren't believed. They are here.

The second is, it's possible to care for those ostracised or in trouble in a way that enhances, rather than diminishes, your community. The reputation of social care for the disadvantaged is that either it's amateurish, and needs to be professionalised, or it's sectarian, and needs to be secularised, or it's too demanding, and sooner or later it burns people out. St Martin's isn't immune to these tendencies. But none of us can imagine our community without the enrichment and challenge that come from people whose face, or migrant status, or identity doesn't fit. And that's because it comes not out of some self-important altruism but out of recognition of our own need, and desire to be transformed by the strangers God sends us.

The third is, it's possible to be highly aspirational, financially sustainable, and rewardingly participatory all at the same time. So many creative initiatives come to grief because they focus on one of these and overlook the others. What we're doing at St Martin's with music, and are moving towards with visual arts, is to establish a programme that expresses all three dimensions. Beauty and brilliance are great; fun and friendship are great too; and having enough money to do it again next year is just as important. We're about all three.

The fourth is, it's possible to have commercial activities and administrative practices that deepen and embody our understanding of the kingdom, rather than conflict with or confuse it. The business brings into our life, as customers and staff, a myriad of people who otherwise might not come near us and a diversity of identity that's dynamic and energising. By serving people and creating a staff team, we learn what love and justice and flourishing mean when translated into economic decisions and regular habits of trade and employment. If we want to pay good wages we have to make sacrifices elsewhere; if we want to sell fair trade lines we have to ensure they're attractive; if we want to give disadvantaged a step on the employment ladder we need to give them appropriate support. It's really hard, sometimes, and we're far from perfect: but if we get these things right we're discovering a pearl of great price.

The fifth is, it's possible to grow without becoming impersonal, two-dimensional, or an ogre. None of us wants to lose the joys of interactive community. All of us know what it feels like for something spontaneous and good to become big or formulaic and lose its character. We use the word 'partnership' a lot to name the ways we share our practice and extend our influence while respecting and affirming our differences from other organisations and without building and empire. Though broadcasting, webcasting, and podcasting, and through building networks of institutions and individuals, we're seeking to promote the things we believe in while preserving and cherishing what's unique about our own context.

The sixth is, you can do unbelievable things together if you start with one another's assets not their deficits. In a community of fear we begin with our hurts and our stereotypes, and find a hundred reasons why we can't do things or certain kinds of people don't belong. But if you take off labels like disabled or wealthy or migrant or evangelical or single and instead see qualities like passionate or committed or generous or enthusiastic or humble then there's no limit to what a community of hope can do. God gives us everything we need to fulfil our vocation. If we experience our life as scarcity, and yet don't receive and enjoy the gifts God gives us, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

And so to the seventh and last. This I believe is the most significant witness of St Martin-in-the-Fields to church and nation today. It's possible to believe that, in Christ, the future is bigger than the past. So much of the church is limping around looking sorry for itself like a puppy with a sore paw. And much of social and political discourse is being inflamed with a rhetoric of nostalgia for some ill-defined era of pure nationhood and cultural supremacy. Christianity is founded on two convictions: the forgiveness of sins, that believes the past can be healed by the Holy Spirit; and everlasting life, which believes our future with Christ has no end. St Martin's loves to tell stories of good things and noble deeds that have happened here. But the best and most prophetic thing about St Martin's is that it believes the future's bigger than the past. That's what makes it such an energised and inspiring community. We don't know, but we're learning. We haven't arrived, but the journey's great. We're not sure exactly where we're going, but it's getting better all the time. We've had some wonderful experiences, but the best is yet to come.

Many of you will remember the Carpenters' 1970 hit '*We've Only Just Begun*' (which you may be aware is ranked #405 on Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Songs of All Time). St Martin's has many blessings, and a great deal to enjoy and be proud of, as well as much still to discover and learn. But for me the best thing of all is that there's another carpenter, and that carpenter is whispering gently in our ear a sweet, sweet song, '*We've Only Just Begun*.' Thank you for being part of and giving so much to this community of hope. We've only just begun.

A Note of Thanks

We are blessed at St Martin's by outstanding lay leaders. I will say a proper thank you to Ali Lyon in two weeks' time, but you all know as well as I do that her contribution has been immense and immeasurable. Gail has had a tremendous first year as warden, and I look forward to many more.

I'm particularly grateful for her conscientious follow-through and attention to detail. And Helen Platts has taken to the role of treasurer with skill, dedication and wisdom.

I want to thank my clergy colleagues, Richard, Katherine, Jonathan, Paul, Alastair, and Will, not forgetting Colin and our reader Jeff and pastoral assistant Andrew. They continue to amaze and inspire me with their love and commitment and wisdom.

I'm grateful to each member of the PCC, especially to those standing down this time, Ike, Nike, and Wilson, and to Bob and Duncan, our deputy wardens. Thanks to the committee chairs and co-chairs, Martin, Caroline, Susannah, Bronwyn and her team, Alex and Fiona; to Susanne who chairs the Friends, to all the members of committees and groups, to Sir Nicholas and those who sit on our Arts Advisory Panel, and to all who build up and serve the Chinese Church Council. I want to put in a special word for our magnificent choir, to Tom for his direction, to Jeremy for his organ skills, to our extraordinary choral scholars and Voices and to the Occasional Singers and to Emily and the Children's Voices. I want to celebrate Andrew who harmonises our whole musical programme and at the same time continues to amaze and delight by pulling out of the hat one thrilling rabbit after another.

I am grateful to all who prepare flowers and Kristine and the enormous team who steward for services and Anna and those who've worked with children and adhered to and honoured our safeguarding policy. Thank you to Angela and Elinor who support the clergy and parish and congregation in many ways, to our new PCC secretary Chantal and minute-taker Emma, and our vergers Jacqui, Anna, Tony, Anna and Gary. I'm grateful to Sr Vivien and the lay chaplains and to our bell ringers and to Michael and the archive team. I want to thank all who attend worship and give generously and participate and support so willingly the many activities of St Martin's life in worship by being a server or lesson-reader or chalice assistant or intercessor or member of the healing team. We all want to thank those who've served in education by planning or hosting or cleaning up, in hospitality by serving coffee or meals or making people at home, in pastoral care by visiting and supporting, in fellowship by joining with or leading the Cloak or the Archers or the Open Circle or Club Wednesday or the Meditation Group or cleaning the church at Easter or talking to a visitor, or continuing to pray and think and remember even when not able to attend, or in international links by maintaining close contacts with partners in South Africa, Berlin, Malawi, Hong Kong and elsewhere.

Under the leadership of Chris Burford as chair and Ally Hargreaves as Executive Director, and with a number of new and dynamic directors, SMITFL has had another impressive year, and I want to express just how happy and proud I and the whole of St Martin's are for what the company does and for everything it stands for. I also want to uphold Ally herself as a model of humble, selfless, and talented service for the whole community. The business has quite simply transformed the way St Martin's thinks about church. We are so grateful to all who wear the St Martin's logo and work with such dedication. I'm thankful for a terrific staff team: for Nadine at human resources, Ryan, Warren and Duncan at estates, Idris and his finance team, Caroline and the concerts team, Steve, Ladka and Adam and their food services team, Sarah and our retail team, Julie and Sam in marketing, and everyone that makes the business and administration of St Martin's profitable, proud, and personable.

I also want to thank members of the wider St Martin's community. St Martin's Trust has had a year of promising growth. Katy is a wonderful development director, and we have a tremendous team of trustees. St Martin's Charity raised a marvellous £2.5m, up 8% on last year, and under Tim's excellent leadership with the support of the chair Patricia and the trustees and Dorothy and the mafia and all the congregation and other volunteers, and of course our wonderful partners at the BBC, the Charity is looking towards exciting expansion in sources of funding and forms of expenditure. This is an opportunity to say a heartfelt thanks to Diana who is stepping down after 12

years as chair of The Connection Trustees and to Colin who is planning to retire after 25 years at the helm of The Connection and its predecessor charity the London Connection. Their contribution to the well-being of London's poorest is immeasurable. Thanks also to the Friends of the Connection and their president Charles Woodd, to all who organise and join in the Pilgrimage and the Cycle Ride, and those who help with the Vicar's General Fund. Among others I'm glad for all who promote and play in concerts and in Jazz nights, our American Trustees, Edith and the Bishop Ho Ming Wah Association and Community Centre and Alice and the Ho Ming Wah trustees, remembering with gratitude Judith who gave four generous years as chair before her. I want to mention Beverley who began in September as Head of St Martin-in-the-Fields High School for Girls, together with Bob the chair and all the governors there. And I should add our good wishes to and Liz the head and Simon the chair at Archbishop Tenison's.