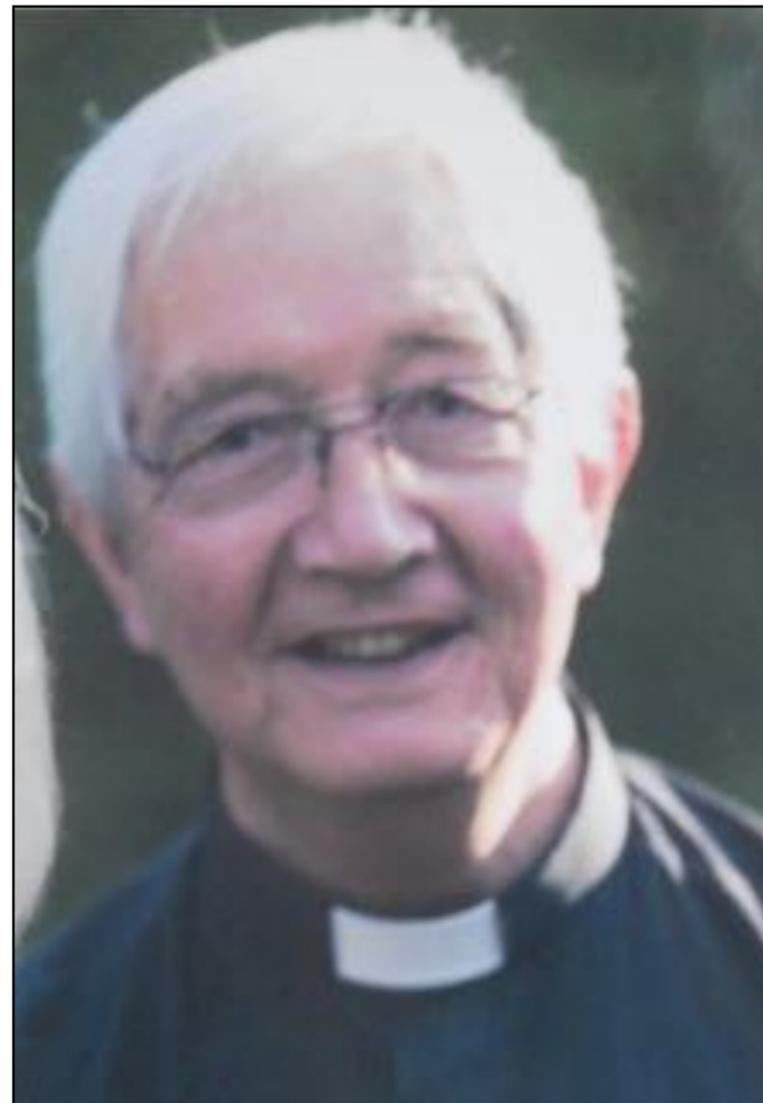


## By Reverend Dr John Richardson

Have you any idea how many people have attended services in St Mary's church since its foundation stone was laid one hundred and twenty six years ago? No prizes for guessing.

What is more important is just how many people's lives have been touched by their association with St Mary's and its people. That, after all, is what the church is all about; that through our membership of the church, our lives have been touched by God through other people just as we hope others' lives have been touched by God through us.

Although I am old I do not quite go back a hundred and twenty-five years, and yet for the past forty-five



years I have from time to time been associated with St Mary's.

In the 1970s, when I was vicar of Stoneleigh, I became friends with Harvey Pentreath when he was vicar of St Mary's, and we shared many discussions about the church and why we were part of it.

After time spent in other parishes I returned to St Mary's in 2009 for a short while and then later became an assistant priest in the parish. Many people will have had a much longer connection than I have with the church, but we all share a common experience. That experience has been of a place - or more correctly, of a family - where we have known fellowship, love, care, and support and have been given comfort and hope in

what has often been a difficult and troubled world, perhaps none more than at the present time.

When I retired from my last parish in Sussex and returned to Stoneleigh I took on the job of administering what's known in the Guildford Diocese as *Clergy on Call* - finding mostly retired clergy in the diocese to help out by providing cover for services when the vicar was on holiday or sick or during vacancies. Inevitably, this meant that often when I could not find someone to help out, I ended up doing it myself.

Consequently, over a period of about six years I found myself taking services in forty-nine different churches in the Guildford diocese. The busiest was 2013 - twenty-seven different churches.

The point of telling you this is that no two churches are the same - not only do they have different services, (I discovered there is no such thing as Common worship) but there is an extraordinary variation in liturgical practices, lay participation, the

choice of hymns and the quality of after-service coffee. What an extraordinary variety of people the church is!

In the course of my ministry I have served churches in suburbia, (very) rural Norfolk, town centre Kingston, rural Sussex, and now St Mary's. It is now fifty-five years since I was made deacon in Guildford cathedral by Bishop George Reindorp, before which I had spent three years at Lichfield Theological College (sadly no longer in existence).

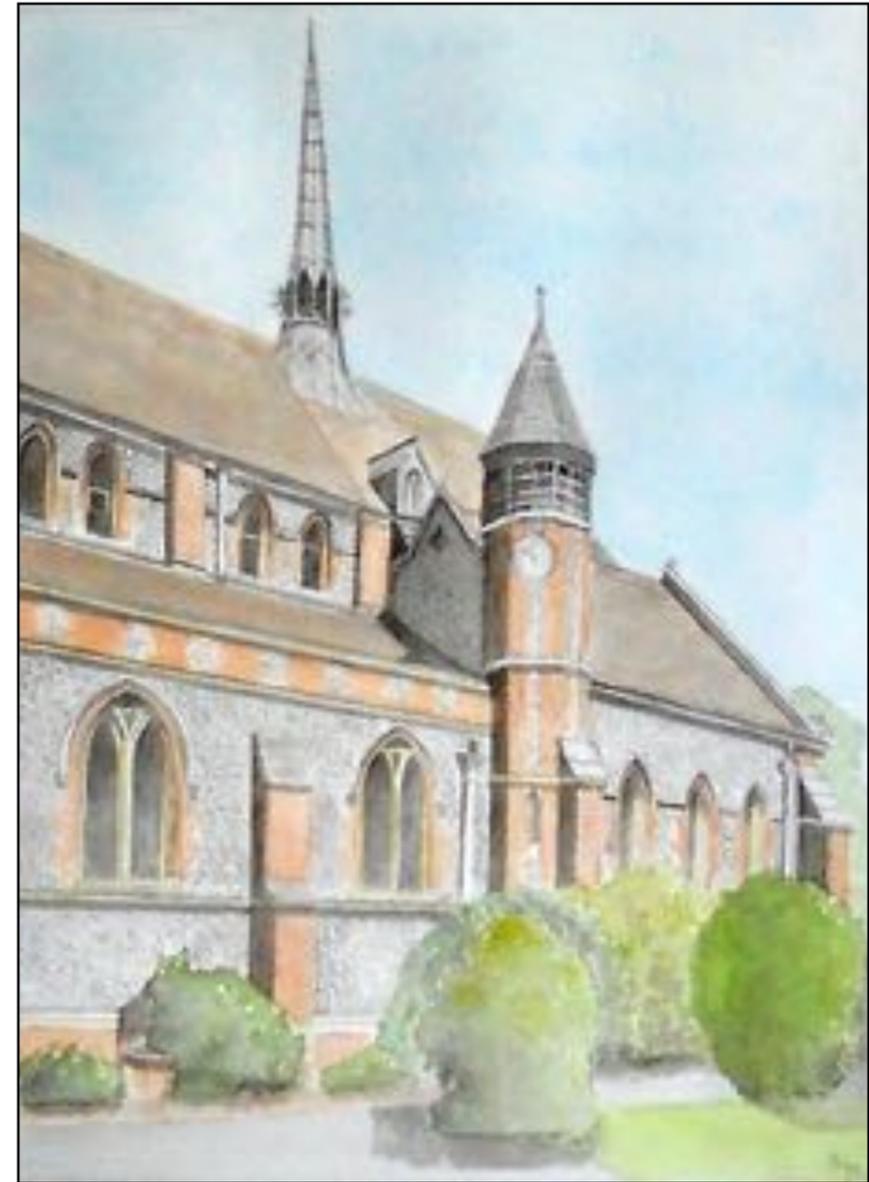
It was during my time at Lichfield that I discovered Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor who was executed in 1945 for his opposition to the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer's writings have had a huge influence on the church (and me), and in particular the question which kept coming back to him: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" That is a question we have to ask ourselves continuously, and to remind ourselves that it is not Jesus Christ who changes, but it is we who have to change in order to make his message relevant to our time and circumstances.

It is perhaps not surprising that I ask myself how things have changed since I was ordained. And that is when I remind myself that it is not the changes that matter as why we have made them.

As we celebrate one hundred and twenty-five years in the life of St Mary's, there is much cause for thanksgiving - for those thousands of people who have served God and one another as members of this church family.

It is also an occasion to remind ourselves that the church is something bigger than St Mary's, and that we are part of a world-wide Christian family called to serve God, each other and our neighbour - not just in our community but wherever and whenever the need arises.

Above all, to reflect on one hundred and twenty-five years of service to God and the community is to challenge ourselves to think about how we continue the work of God now and in the future.



Watercolour of St Mary's by John Richardson