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Dear Friends

It is my first Christmas with you, and I feel so happy to be here. We've been made to feel very welcome and truly part of the St. Mary's family. Over the past few months, I've been learning about some of St. Mary's traditions and putting a 'Rev. Phe' tweak on a few of them! What I've learnt is that St. Mary's is loved by all those who attend it, as well as those who don't! Over the next year I would like to make sure that we continue and increase our relevance in this beautiful place of Stoke D'Abernon but also beyond our boundaries.

I felt honoured to be able to host Bishop Alwin, from Sialkot Diocese, Pakistan on Friday 25th November. There were about 20 of us who listened to him tell us the importance of prayer, worship and building relationships with those beyond our walls. He spoke about the difficulties they face, but he was hopeful that fostering the relationships he has built with the Diocese of Guildford will bring mutual blessings for all of us. I believe that we often underestimate the power of prayer, so I was thrilled to hear Bishop Alwin speak of prayer as a powerful tool for Christians to use.

I would like us to make 2023 a year of prayer, of putting prayer at the very heart of who we are and giving it the importance it deserves. From January, I shall be in church on Thursday mornings at 10 am for Matins and would love people to join me. If you can't join me in person, perhaps you can put some time aside to join me in prayer wherever you are.

One of the things I would like us to pray about is how we contribute to the life of our church. I don't need to tell you that we need financial giving to keep the church running and the best way to do that is through planned regular giving, we are then able to plan and budget wisely for the future. If you would like further information about Planned Giving, I would be delighted to pass your details to Stephen Chater. If you are a UK taxpayer, we will be able to benefit by an additional 25% through Gift Aiding your donation. I would also like us to consider what we do as a church, our outreach to the community, and to the wider world. We need new and fresh ideas for the use of the Church Hall, so that it will not only bring in revenue but also build community through its use. As we not only need money; we need more people attending our services.

I believe a healthy church is one that prays together and reaches outwards, beyond its walls. Our mission as Christians is to help others in our community and the wider world to know the love of God in their lives. What I have discovered about St. Mary's is that many of you are quietly doing that in amazing ways. **And I thank you for that!**

However, as we move into this season of Advent, our liturgy makes us aware of our need to prepare for Christ's return, we are brought into this stark reality just as the world hangs up tinsel and plays Christmas music! It is a season that makes us consider what we are doing and how we can improve. During Advent, we have traditionally had a '**Christmas Appeal**', whereby on top of our regular giving for the upkeep of our church, we make an additional donation to a charity. I

would like us to keep that tradition alive, as it makes us look beyond ourselves to the needs of others. The PCC and I agreed that this year our Christmas Appeal would again raise money for the local charity 'Oasis', giving them 100% of all funds raised through this appeal. Many of you know that Oasis Children's Charity is a unique service based in Cobham, providing necessary and vital support to families across Elmbridge. More details can be found at: www.oasischildcare.co.uk. You can donate by sending a cheque to the parish office made payable to: Parochial Church Council of Stoke d'Abernon and please write 'Christmas Appeal' on the back of your cheque. If you wish to make an online donation, the sort code is 60 06 03 and the account number is 343 11 211 and the account name is Parochial Church Council of Stoke d'Abernon and please, in the reference, write 'Christmas Appeal'.

Another charity we support at Christmas is, 'Crisis at Christmas', a homeless charity supporting and helping those living without the comfort of home. We shall be holding our Christmas lunch again this year where we will give the profits to 'Crisis at Christmas'. More about the charity 'Crisis' can be found at: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/crisis-at-christmas/>.

Additionally, because we are adding a Christingle to the Crib service on Christmas Eve, we have agreed to donate £500 to 'The Children's Society'. The 'Children's Society' is a national Charity helping, advocating, and supporting children across the UK. More details about them can be found at: <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/>

As you can see, we are considering the needs of others and looking beyond our walls, but in the New Year the PCC and I would like to prayerfully consider how and what we give to the outside world. We would like you to pray about this as well.

Thank you for all that you are doing, thank you for what you will do and thank you for making St. Mary's a wonderful church community to be a part of. During this Advent season, as you prepare for Christ's birth at Christmas, I ask that you prayerfully consider putting our 'Christmas Appeal' on your Christmas present list so that St. Mary's can help 'Oasis' bring comfort and joy to the children they support.

I hope you have a happy and blessed Christmas.

Revd. Phe