Your monthly update from Earley St Peter's church: November 2026

1 message

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2 November 2026 at 07:49

Earley St Peter's Church



Your Monthly Update from Earley St Peter's – November 2026

Thought for the month *from the Revd Dr Kajsa Longuère*

Interfaith dialogue

Do you recall the image of the Archbishop of Canterbury Dame Sarah Mullally shaking hands with Muslim cleric Hafiz Muhammad Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi? Ashrafi had brought his wife and daughter to London as he awarded the *Hubert Walter Award for Reconciliation and Interfaith Cooperation* at Lambeth Palace, and the event made it to our major media outlets.

The award coincided with the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in New York, and the photograph depicted Ashrafi's wife wearing a niqab which seems to have stirred the response sent by conservative shadow ministers Nick Timothy and Rebecca Paul who sent a letter of complaint to Lambeth Palace. The complaint

listed two arguments, firstly that Ashrafi allegedly had called Osama Bin Laden 'Saifullah' (sword of God) after 9/11, though Ashrafi argues this is taken out of context and that the word was used in relation to Sir Salman Rushdie's knighthood. Secondly, that Dame Sarah had been pictured with Mrs Ashrafi who wore a niqab which the letter writers claim would suggest that the Church of England condones the oppression of women. Seemingly bowing to political pressure and rather one-sided media coverage, the reward was withdrawn.

As uncomfortable as the 'Saifullah' comment is to me, the idea that political pressure can lead to a withdrawal of the award is also uncomfortable, in a face-palm sort of way. This situation invokes many questions that I'm boiling down to three. Firstly, why is Interfaith work important? Secondly, what has Ashrafi done to favour interfaith dialogue? And thirdly, to what extent should the Church of England have bowed to political pressure? As you can probably tell, this will be a relatively long article (and hopefully I'll have kept my license to officiate by the end of it)!

The Bible doesn't specifically mention the words 'Interfaith dialogue', but there are several references to loving others and neighbours, such as Matthew 22:37–39. Earley being very multicultural, I think we can all recognise our neighbours of other faiths or none. God wants us to love all our neighbours, including Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Atheist, Humanist, and Jewish such, regardless of their mode of dressing or fashion choices. To do so, we need to engage with them, for what relationship flourishes and becomes love without talking and listening to the other? The idea that clothes, niqabs or otherwise, is the real issue here is ridiculous and we mustn't let ourselves be blindsided by that argument. Or course Dame Sarah, the first female Archbishop of Canterbury, doesn't condone the oppression of women – what a red herring!

Paul, who was not blind-sided, used the love of his neighbours to his (and Christ's) advantage while engaging with Stoic and pagan philosophers at the Aeropagus in Athens, as recounted in Acts 17:16-34. He engaged with them directly and even quoted their own poets, which helped both sides find common ground, before he introduced them to the Gospel. Peter, too, took a pragmatic interfaith view as he said 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him (Acts 10:34-35). In 1 Peter 35, which Peter is traditionally thought to have authored, he tells us to always be prepared to make our defence to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that we hold, but also to do it with gentleness and respect.

God likes building bridges and he loves his children of every nation to get on. In a society with many faith, interfaith work seeks to achieve exactly this. Our scriptures are making this very point.

The second questions regards Ashrafi's interfaith work, which is very substantial, as our own Anthan Ilyas can testify to in person having been a catholic priest in Pakistan who has also worked with Ashrafi in the context of interfaith dialogue. The lived reality for Christians in Pakistan is also something that Anthan can relate to in detail, and it is a tale of persecution and violence, in society and the law alike. There are, for instance, blasphemy laws that are very strict, and often abused by those seeking to harm the Christian community, a minority in Pakistan. Being accused of converting someone from Islam to Christianity comes with a death sentence.

Anthan tells me that Ashrafi has been very clear regarding the abuse of these laws (because they are often abused), and the punishment of false accusations. Ashrafi has advocated and intervened on behalf of persecuted Christians in Pakistan, a fact confirmed by the Church of Pakistan, whose Moderator Dr Azad Marshall called for an apology from the archbishop for the withdrawal of the award. In relation to blasphemy laws, Dr Marshall commented to Church Times, Ashrafi has been "instrumental in releasing many people before the mob can lynch them." (Church Times, 23 September 2026). Regarding Ashrafi's past comments, Dr Marshall says that people change over time and that Ashrafi has shown that he has a deep respect for Christians which needs to count for something. (Church Times, 23 September 2026). And isn't the fact that we can change and be saved despite our many sins and flaws a fundamental tenet of our faith? If God can be merciful, graceful, and eager to pardon guilt (Micah 7:18–19), then we should surely seek to do the same (Matthew 6:14–15). Surely, the Church had time to exercise due diligence and gather evidence and input from the Church of Pakistan and the Christian community before they presented the award. But what has happened is instead that both Ashrafi, the Christian community, and Pakistan in general is feeling deeply offended, which cannot be helpful the already persecuted Christian community.

The third question is about whether the Church should bow to political pressure. What do you think? There is no consensus to be had as the Church of England is in a complicated position, being structurally tied to the state through its unique constitutional position. The King as Head of State is the head of the Church and there are Church representatives present in the House of Lords. The Church often comment on topics that are up for discussion such as AI, assisted dying, and the conflict in the Holy Land. But to what extent should we (as in the Church) allow political pressure to impact on our decision-making?

Some of the arguments for independence from political pressure are that we should preserve the Gospel and moral authority as our first duty is to God and the teachings of the Bible, not the political lay of the land. We should also be holding the state accountable and offer our expertise as a moral conscience through our 'Lords Spiritual', which often happens as the bishops criticise government policies using biblical principles. I also think there is a chance that the Church may alienate ordinary churchgoers if it moves too much into the realms of political activism. We are a broad Church after all.

Now for a few arguments for the other side that claims that the Church should adapt to external and political realities. As the Church doesn't exist in a vacuum but is a national institution and protected under UK law, it needs to adapt to modern ethical standards and be democratically and socially relevant. Tied in with this is the reality in which major changes to the governance of the Church are subject to parliamentary approval through, for instance, the Parliament's Ecclesiastical Committee which examines the 'measures' decided on by the General Synod. The Church cannot therefore navigate this space without also navigating political bodies. Another aspect of governance that is important relates to accountability, such as related to systemic safeguarding failures and abuse scandals; of course, external political and public pressure is necessary to achieve reform and accountability.

I think both sides of the coin carry weight overall, but what happened in this example does not fit well with any of the reasons that I've found to justify political influence. To me, the withdrawal of the award seems more to do with a desire to avoid bad publicity in a situation where the media seemed to focus on one side of the argument. Withdrawn, without making a fully informed decision and relating to the context in which that award was withdrawn, which isn't just the context of Lambeth Palace, but the context within which Pakistani Christians live and worship. While Dame Sarah is the senior bishop and Primate of All England for the Church of England, she is also as Archbishop of Canterbury the spiritual leader, or *primus inter pares* (first among equals) who should foster unity within the worldwide Anglican Communion, of which the Church of Pakistan is a member.

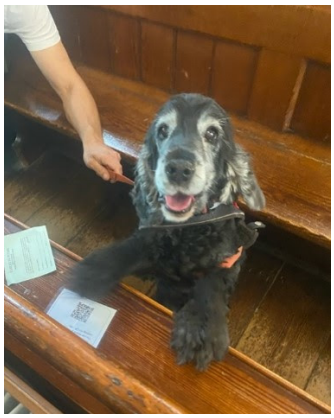
Fortunately for us all, and Pakistani Christians in particular, Ashrafi seems to have retained his willingness to engage in Interfaith dialogue. There is a snap of him standing alongside senior Pakistani Roman Catholic clergy at the celebration of 75 years of diplomatic ties between the Holy See and Pakistan on 9 October.



News for November

(see also the full calendar at the bottom of this newsletter)







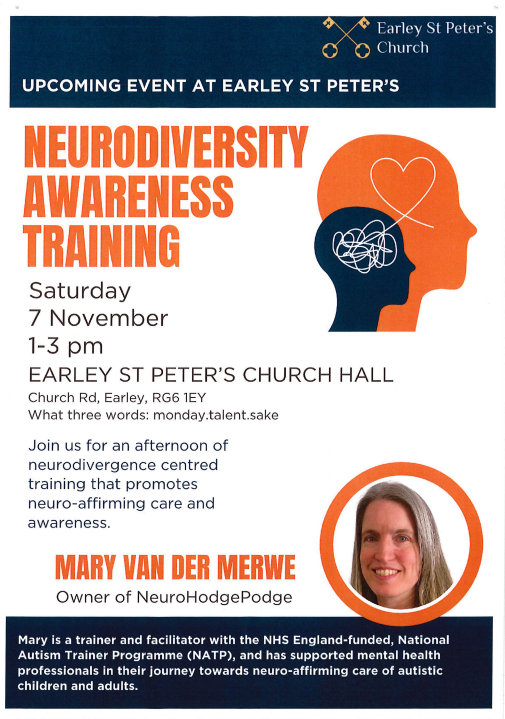
Some of the cute pets (and pet pictures) from our Pet Blessing service on St Francis' Day. Thank you to all who supported this special service.







Saturday 7 November, 1pm: Neurodiversity Awareness. We are welcoming back Mary van der Merwe to give another Neurodiversity Awareness training session, as part of our Life in all its Fullness programme. Please sign up on ChurchSuite.



Update on the hospitality area

It will not have escaped to notice that the furniture from the hospitality area has been removed. Sadly, our Faculty application for the furniture was rejected by the diocese. The reasons given were that it was not in keeping with the design/decor of the church and also that it appeared uncomfortable and impractical. Although I have had to accept their decision, I have disputed the latter point as I know that many people have benefitted from the comfy chairs and have enjoyed a more relaxed environment. The Faculty for the pew removal was granted and so the area still exists, but it may be some time before we can afford furniture from the diocesan-approved furniture catalogues for use in church.

To say that I am disappointed with the decision is an understatement, particularly as they have asked for all of the furniture to be removed, including the sofa, folding tables and chairs and our lovely little kitchenettes.

For the time being, the library will be moved into that area along with a noticeboard detailing upcoming study courses and events. This will leave room on the back noticeboard for a well-being and community section.

Someone from the diocese has offered to meet with me and one of the buildings officers to talk through the decision. Although I do not think the decision will be reversed, I will use the opportunity to listen to their reasoning whilst also putting forward my own views and the views of some parishioners who have been particularly upset by the removal of the furniture. I will give an update after the meeting has taken place. *Kate*

'Questions and Cake' attendance age and change of structure: an update from Kate and John

There has been some confusion over attendance at Questions and Cake. It has always been for Year 6 upwards but, due to a project which included some of our younger children, a few Year 5 students have attended some sessions this term.

This obviously creates a larger age range, and we do not always have enough volunteers to provide activities to cater for different ages and interests. However, the Year 5s were great fun and made some brilliant contributions, so we have decided to try something new which will accommodate younger attendees but also maintain the space for the original age range of Year 6 upwards. We have given this much thought and discussion, and have come up with the following plan for the remainder of this academic year:

1st Sunday of the month

5.30-6.45pm 'Question and Cake – Junior!' for Years 5-7

6.45-8pm 'Questions and Cake' for Years 6-11

3rd Sunday of the month

6.45-8pm 'Questions and Cake' for Years 6-11

Please note the slightly adjusted timings for the original Q and C.

We will review this before September 2027 and decide whether to go back to the original Q and C model for Year 6 upwards or to keep this new model.

Song School



Do you know a young person in school years 5 to 8 who loves singing? We'd like to welcome more young people to join our Song School. We rehearse on Thursdays from 6-7.25pm in term term, and sing at six to seven Sunday services per term. Membership is free, and members receive payment for services and rehearsals, as well as free music tuition and individual singing lessons. To find out more, please contact music@earleystpeters.org.uk

Volunteers needed for Sunday refreshments



Gillian and her team work very hard to offer refreshments on Sundays after the main morning service and we are all very grateful for their commitment. Unfortunately, due to unexpected circumstances, the team could benefit from some new volunteers joining them. Hospitality is an important part of the life of St Peter's and the Sunday team are often the people who serve drinks to visitors or people who are new to the parish. If you are interested or have any queries, please email Gillian Gatehouse at gillygate@talktalk.net

Could you volunteer with REinspired?

REinspired in a sentence – Church volunteers partnering with REinspired to show faith in action, with creative school RE lessons, enhanced by real, lived-out experiences of faith.

If you love story-telling, craft and wondering along with children on the big questions of life, this could be for you.

Come and Join the team - Sarah Godwin needs you! Her team at Newtown Primary School is passionate to see young people know more about Jesus. You will be trained and supported as part of a group and you'll gain new skills and confidence.

Ask Sarah for more information or email Julia.Jones@reinspired.org.uk

Minimum of four hours a term. Warning: volunteering can become addictive!

Christmas Fayre – it's nearly time!

After months of planning, the Christmas Fayre has nearly arrived and we are starting to collect items for some of the stalls and games. There will be labelled boxes , mostly at the back of Church with a couple in the Church hall. The diagram below shows what we are collecting for and where you can drop off individual items.



Last month we posted a link to a form detailing all the different ways people can get involved in the Christmas fair, which is on Friday 11 December from 3pm till 7 pm. This is the link to the form, for those who have not filled it and it would be really helpful to know how many people are able to help on the day or in preparation.

Christmas Fayre form

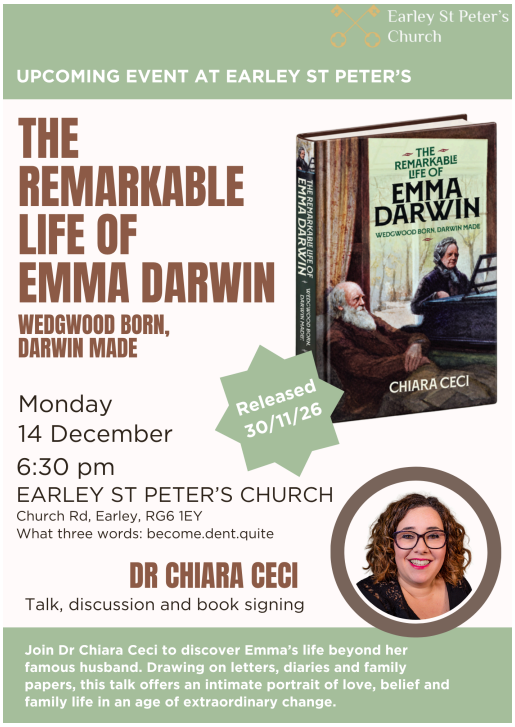
As you will see, we need people to run the stalls, which will be set up and planned in advance, and we also need people to do the setting up and clearing away at the end. There is also space on the form to indicate whether you need a lift to the fayre or whether you are able to help by giving lifts. *Kate*

Pastoral support: Our pastoral team will be happy to hear if you, or anybody you know, would welcome a phone call or visit. Please contact the parish office (0118 966 8575) or Mary Brooke (0118 926 2153)

Woodley Food Bank donations:

Thank you for all your support to our local food bank with donations of tins, cartons, dried goods with a long shelf life and also the ever important personal hygiene items. Please donate if you are able in the box at the back of the church. Our continued support is still very much needed. *Anne and Ken Richardson* More information here: www.woodleyfoodbank.org

14 December, 6.30pm: talk on *The Remarkable Life of Emma Darwin.* Join Dr Chiara Ceci to discover Emma's life beyond her famous husband. This talk will offer a portrait of love, belief and family life in an era of extraordinary challenge.



Mission Focus

CMS Peru

The PCC supports two overseas mission partners. This month we'll focus on Anna Sims, an arts educator based in Lima, Peru, with the Church Mission Society. She describes herself as "passionate about God, Latin America, people and the arts" and her mission as "Work alongside the local church to build community and share Jesus in creative ways in urban Lima".

She felt God calling her to mission in Latin America during a short-term arts project in Ecuador and that led to her work with CMS in Peru. St Peter's has sponsored Anna since she started her training and ever since she arrived in Lima in September 2013.

She spent 11 years working with 'Walking in Liberty', supporting English-speaking female prisoners and ex-offenders; offering "singing, Bible study, prayer and conversation" with them while in prison and supporting them after their sentence while they dealt with the process of getting home again.

In 2024 Anna's mission shifted focus and she now partners with iCafe (standing for imagination, culture, art and faith), a church and cultural initiative with a heart to reach the many people in Lima who do not feel comfortable in a traditional church setting, particularly artists. She also works with the Inti Ayllu ministry in Pamplona, which she has been involved with since Easter 2023.

We hold two fundraising events for Anna each year; our Beetle drive in October and another event to be run in Summer 2027. This year's Beetle Drive raised £66 for Anna's work and was enjoyed by all who attended.

Anna sends us regular updates about her work, and you can read more about all that she does on the boards in her mission window in church.

Calendar for November

(the information below is also available via My ChurchSuite and our web site)

We meet every weekday morning at 8.55am (Fridays at 8.30am) in the church for Morning Prayer. All welcome.

Sunday 1 November	8am	Holy Communion
	10am	Bread and Wine
	3pm	All Souls' service
	5.30pm	Questions and Cake Junior
	6.45pm	Questions and Cake (years 6-11)

Monday 2 November	9am	Church open
	2pm	Sunshine Social
Tuesday 3 November	9am	Church open
	11am	Holy Communion
Wednesday 4 November	9am	Church open
	10.15am	Tots and Teddies
Friday 6 November	11.30am	Funeral of Pauline Hobbs
Saturday 7 November	10am-3pm	Church open
	1pm	Training: Neurodiversity awareness
Sunday 8 November	10am	Remembrance Service Children's Church Inspiration Group
	6.30pm	Choral Eucharist for Remembrance
Tuesday 10 November	9am	Church open
	11am	Holy Communion

Wednesday 11 November	9am	Church open
	10.15am	Tots and Teddies
Thursday 12 November	10am	Thursday@10: coffee and chat
Friday 13 November	9.30am	Church cleaning
	10.30am	Compassion Cafe
Saturday 14 November	10am-3pm	Church open
Sunday 15 November	10am	Parish Communion Children's Church Inspiration Group
	12pm	Baptism of Georgie Rogers
	6.30pm	Reflective Communion
	6.45pm	Questions and Cake (years 6-11)
Monday 16 November	9am	Church open
Tuesday 17 November	9am	Church open
	11am	Holy Communion

	12pm	Holy Communion at The Birches
Wednesday 18 November	9am	Church open
	10.15am	Tots and Teddies
Saturday 21 November	10am-3pm	Church open
	10am	Parish Prayer Walk
Sunday 22 November	10am	Parish Communion Children's Church
	4pm	Messy Church
	6.30pm	Choral Evensong with Song School
Monday 23 November	9am	Church open
Tuesday 24 November	9am	Church open
	11am	Holy Communion
Wednesday 25 November	9am	Church open
	10.15am	Tots and Teddies
	11.30am	Holy Communion at Embrook Court

Thursday 26 November	10am	Thursday@10: Richard Hubbard on Friends International
Saturday 28 November	10am-3pm	Church open
	2pm	Study: Gospel of Mark
Sunday 29 November	10am	Parish Communion Children's Church
	6.30pm	Advent Carol Service with Song School

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