

Life in the Spirit Prayer Group

45 years 1980-2025



Parish of St Joan of Arc,
Farnham

PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

On 13th September, the “Life in the Spirit” Prayer Group based at the Parish of St Joan of Arc Farnham celebrated its 45th anniversary. It has been meeting weekly with almost no breaks since 1980. Around thirty five present and past members of the group and their guests gathered first of all in the Church for Mass celebrated by Fr Paul Leonard from St Joseph’s Basingstoke.



After Mass, everyone went through to the Parish Centre for talks, a shared lunch and a chance to catch up with each other.



Alastair Emblem, who has coordinated the group since 1992, led a time of joyful praise and worship and gave a quick history of the group since its foundation, followed by greetings from former members and others from the Catholic Charismatic world who have helped the group over the years. See later pages)



This was followed by an inspiring talk from Charles and Sue Whitehead, who have been at the forefront of renewal for around 50 years, starting with a prayer group in their home. Charles worked closely with Pope John Paul II as chair of the International Charismatic Renewal Office in the Vatican for 11 years. And in 1994 Charles and Sue launched the popular Celebrate conferences for families.



PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

FORTY-FIVE YEARS OF PRAYER

These are some brief highlights of this prayer group over the last 45 years. This will be a nostalgia trip for some of the oldies, and hopefully an interesting history lesson for newer people.

The group was started approximately 45 years ago by former PP Fr Michael “Smiler” Albon PP here from 1978 until his untimely death in 1981 at the age of only 53. He was greatly loved by parishioners, was very saintly but full of joy.

The priest who was sitting with him in hospital just before he died of cancer said he suddenly opened his eyes and exclaimed “Hurrah! Hurrah! I’m so happy!”

He apparently had a sign on his study wall reading “JOY” – Jesus first; Others second; Yourself last. Joy has always been a foundation of our group, with a strong emphasis on praise in all our meetings. We were delighted that Joy was such a strong theme of Pope Francis over the last few years.



Jesus first
Others next
Yourself last

After Fr Albon’s untimely demise, the group moved out of the Presbytery to Madeleine Fowler’s House until 1984.



From early 1984 the group was hosted and led by Peter and Margaret Lloyd till 1991.



In summer 1984 Alastair & Jenny Emblem moved to the Parish and joined the group



PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

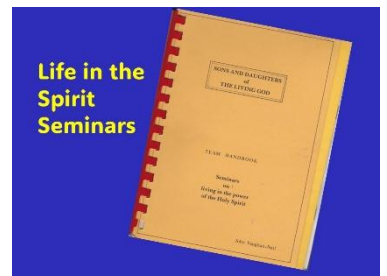
The group formed the prayer support for the Parish participation in the Diocesan Renew programme 1988-90.



In Autumn 1991 Fr Jim Martin became Parish Priest and allowed the group to use the Church Sacristy for meetings.



April-May 1992 we ran the first Life in the Spirit Seminars jointly with Holy Family parish at Heath End.



Around that time, Alastair took over leadership.

In 2001 Canon Tony Whale became Parish Priest and allowed us to meet in the Presbytery sitting room. In 2009, thanks to Fr Tony, the new Parish Centre opened and at first our regular weekly meetings were in the Foyer room.



In 2012 Fr Niven arrived and around that time the growing numbers in our meetings meant that we were allowed to move into the main meeting room. He sent us a message for today saying: "Congratulations to you all. Many blessings to you all. Love to you all."



And Fr Simon who came last December has continued to be very supportive. He has also sent a message from his holidays saying: "Sorry I am not here. With my best wishes, prayers, and congratulations on the anniversary."

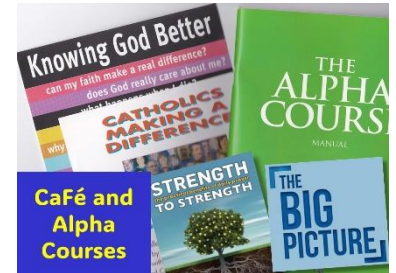


PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

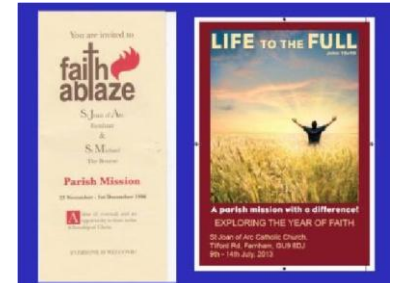
Most years we put on some sort of faith deepening course for the wider parish and beyond: Numerous different versions of Life in the Spirit seminars...



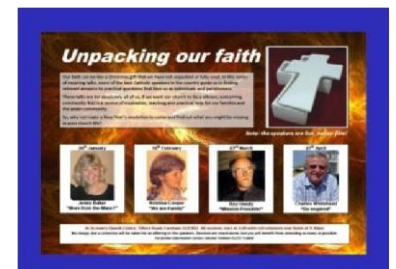
Alpha and Cafe courses; Healing Ministry Training...



...and 2 Parish Missions in 1996 and 2013 ...



Other home-grown courses...



Taize evenings, Holy Hours, Healing services, ecumenical services.



Numbers have fluctuated constantly over the years. A couple of times we have reached a high as 21 but currently we seem to average out at between 9 and 12. For a long time we simply referred to ourselves as the Parish prayer group, because we were the only one. And although at heart we have always been a charismatic prayer group, for many years we were a bit shy about being too overt, for fear of putting people off.



PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

But recent years have thankfully seen the development of a Rosary Group, a Mothers Prayers group, Healing Ministry and a Christian Meditation Group. When Fr Niven came we were encouraged to be more forthcoming about our charismatic nature. Around that time we started calling ourselves the Life in the Spirit prayer group. And of course we are delighted that Pope Francis is so enthusiastic about charismatic renewal.

"You, Charismatic Renewal, have received a great gift from the Lord. You were born of the will of the Spirit as a current of grace in the Church and for the Church."

- Pope Francis, June 2014

We have had a number of messages from former members and other people associated with the group over the years, so I will now read these out and add a few comments.

A couple of our former members have gone on to distinguished careers. **William Newton** was with us for a year or two in the 1990s and is now Professor of Theology and Chair of Theology department at the very prestigious Franciscan University of Steubenville.

He writes: *I remember with real gratitude the time that I spent in Farnham and the most important element of that time was definitely the formation and fellowship that I received through the parish and particularly the prayer group. So I could say that basically the prayer group and the community were absolutely essential for me at that time in my life to foster me in my faith.* (Full message in appendix)



Carol Ann Harnett, who was with us 1993-2016 and went on to be a trainer of catechists first with the Maryvale Institute and now with the School of the Annunciation. She sends the following message: *"Congratulations to the prayer group! What an achievement! Without the prayer group my career would not have taken the direction it has! God is so amazing!"* (Full message in appendix)

God has a different plan for each of His children, and I thank him for every single person who has had any connection with this group and whatever help we have been able to give them on their pilgrimage through life.



The Prayer Group is affiliated to CHARIS, which is the International body set up by Pope Francis in 2018 to unite and foster the charismatic renewal, which he described as a current of grace for the whole church.

We have had messages of congratulation and prayer from different parts of the CHARIS organisation. Shortened messages are given on the following page, and the full texts are in the Appendix



PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

"What a brilliant milestone and a true blessing! I thank God for the gift of your prayer group to the Church and to the world. May this milestone be a moment of looking forward with fresh zeal, as the Lord continues to pour out His Spirit upon you."

- **Abhy Thomas**, CHARIS National Service Coordinator, England & Wales.



This greeting is from **Enrico Berardo**, Leader of the European Division of CHARIS International Commission for prayer groups:

"Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid! The Lord is with you so that you may continue to be true witnesses of new life in the Spirit within the Church. May the Lord bless all your intentions and plans."



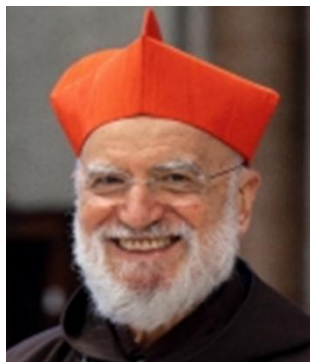
Our **Bishop Richard Moth** of Arundel and Brighton wrote the following: *"I remember Fr. Michael Albon very well since he taught me at the seminary and I know that he would have been a great inspiration as the prayer group began to meet. The prayers of the group over so many years will have brought many blessings to members and the wider community alike and I assure you of my prayers for the future. With every Blessing."*



Bishop David Oakley, who is the Liaison Bishop for Catholic Charismatic Renewal on the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales wrote: *"Thank you for so generously responding to the Lord's invitation to become a people of praise and worship. This is what we were created to do. This is our destiny for all eternity! When we respond to the charisms so graciously gifted to us by the Holy Spirit, we serve the Church and our world in a wonderful way. You have much to give thanks for, and please be assured of my prayer for you at this time."*



Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, Preacher to the Papal Household 1980-2024 wrote the following: *"Dear people of St Joan of Arc Parish, You have experienced what the anointing of the Spirit means and how it changes our way of praying and living. I join you, in this occasion, in giving thanks to God through Jesus Christ and I encourage you to transmit to others what you have received. I pray for you and ask you to pray for me, your old (91 years!) brother."*



Our sincere thanks to all of those, and we remember all of them in our prayers.

We also remember those former members of the group who have gone to be with the Lord. We pray for them, as indeed they are surely praying for us today and every day. Eternal rest give unto them O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them, May they rest in peace. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.

PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

APPENDIX I: MORE PHOTOS FROM THE CELEBRATION DAY



PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

APPENDIX 2: MESSAGES OF CONGRATULATION AND PRAYER



Full message from Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa

(Former Preacher to the Papal Household)

"For however many are the promises of God, their Yes is in him; therefore, the Amen from us also goes through him to God for glory. But the one who gives us security with you in Christ and who anointed us is God; he has also put his seal upon us and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first installment" (2Cor 1:21-22)

Dear brother Alastair Emblem and people of St Joan of Arc Parish, 45 years ago, with the beginning of your "Life in the Spirit" Charismatic prayer group, these words of Paul became a lived experience in your midst. You have experienced (not just believed) what the anointing of the Spirit means and how it changes our way of praying and living.

I join you, in this occasion, in giving thanks to God through Jesus Christ and I encourage you to transmit to others what you have received. I pray for you and ask you to pray for me, your old (91 years!) brother

Fr. Raniero Card. Cantalamessa

Full message from Bishop David Oakley, liaison bishop for Catholic Charismatic Renewal.

Dear friends in Christ,

It is a delight for me to share with you some words of congratulation and encouragement as you celebrate the 45th anniversary of your "Life in the Spirit" Charismatic Prayer Group. Thank you for so generously responding to the Lord's invitation to become a people of praise and worship. This is what we were created to do. This is our destiny for all eternity! When we respond to the charisms so graciously gifted to us by the Holy Spirit, we serve the Church and our world in a wonderful way. You have much to give thanks for, and please be assured of my prayer for you at this time.

Your brother in Christ,

✠ David

Chair of the Department for Evangelisation and Discipleship and liaison bishop for Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Rt Revd Dr David J Oakley, Bishop of Northampton

Full message from Bishop Richard Moth, Bishop of Arundel and Brighton

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am very pleased to offer you my congratulations on the 45th anniversary of the "Life in the Spirit" Prayer Group at St. Joan of Arc Church, Farnham. I remember Fr. Michael Albon very well since he taught me at the seminary and I know that he would have been a great inspiration as the prayer group began to meet.

The prayers of the group over so many years will have brought many blessings to members and the wider community alike and I assure you of my prayers for the future.

With every Blessing, ✠ Richard Moth

PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

Full message from Enrico Berardo, Leader of the European Division of CHARIS International Commission for prayer groups.

«I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching.» (2 Tim 4:1-2)

Dear brothers and sisters of the charismatic prayer group 'Life in the Spirit,' it is with great joy that I accept the invitation from my dear brother Alastair to send you my greetings on the occasion of the celebration to be held on Saturday, 13 September 2025, to mark your 45th anniversary.

Forty-five years of prayer and fraternal life are an important milestone, especially at a time when the world and so many people "stop listening to the truth and are diverted to myths" (2 Tim 4:4). For this reason, I make my own the words of Paul to Timothy, which I have received in prayer as a prophetic word for you: continue tirelessly to proclaim the word of God at all times. May this be true for each of you in your private lives! May this be true for your 'Life in the Spirit' prayer group so that, with the power of the Holy Spirit, it may be missionary to bring the Kingdom of God to so many brothers and sisters who have not yet encountered the merciful face of Jesus.

Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid! The Lord is with you so that you may continue to be true witnesses of new life in the Spirit within the Church. May the Lord bless all your intentions and plans.

Fraternal greetings in Jesus 4th September 2025

Enrico Berardo

Member of the CHARIS International Commission for prayer groups

Full message from Fr Niven Richardson, former Parish Priest at St. Joan of Arc

Dear Alastair and all members of St Joan of Arc - Life in the Spirit Prayer Group, it is with real joy that I write these words of greeting to you on this significant occasion of the celebration of the 45th anniversary of the Prayer group. Life in the Spirit is another description for a Christian. A Christian is a person in whom the Spirit lives. The Creed leads us to profess these words: "I believe in The Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life..."

The Holy Spirit is The Lord, meaning that He is not just some kind of spiritual force, The Holy Spirit is God and He is the giver of Life. The Holy Spirit gives us our spiritual life. The Holy Spirit lives in our spirit to enliven us, to make us filled with His gifts and His fruit. This means that the Life in the Spirit prayer group will always be needed and will always have a future in this Parish. Full of Christian Hope we look forward to the 46th and the 50th and the 100th anniversary.

Congratulations to you all.

Many blessings to you all.

Love to you all.

Come Holy Spirit, we need you. Amen.

Fr Niven.

PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

Full message from Abhy Thomas, CHARIS National Service Coordinator, England & Wales.

Dear Alastair,

What a brilliant milestone and a true blessing! I really thank the Lord for the gift of you to the prayer group, the renewal and to the Church. I hope the below message and prayer are sufficient to mark this special occasion.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

As you celebrate 45 years of faithful witness, I thank God for the gift of your prayer group to the Church and to the world. St. Paul reminds us: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). Truly, your perseverance in prayer and openness to the Spirit is a living testimony to these words.

For nearly half a century, your community has been a wellspring of renewal—bringing people into deeper encounters with Jesus, empowering lives through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and building up the Body of Christ.

On behalf of all who have been touched by your witness, I say: thank you. May this milestone be not only a moment of looking back with gratitude, but also of looking forward with fresh zeal, as the Lord continues to pour out His Spirit upon you.

Prayer of Blessing for the Future

Heavenly Father,

We give You thanks for the 45 years of grace poured out upon this prayer group at St. Joan's. You have gathered Your children here, filled them with Your Spirit, and made them instruments of Your love and power. Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, continue to guide them in unity and holiness. Let Your Word be their light and Your Cross their strength. May they be bold in proclaiming You as Lord and tender in serving those in need. Holy Spirit, renew in them the fire of Pentecost. Pour out fresh charisms, new dreams, and deeper love for Your Church. May they, like Mary, say "yes" each day to Your will, and may they be a beacon of hope in the years ahead. We entrust this community to Your care, O Lord, confident that "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**From the Arundel & Brighton Diocesan
weekly e-news bulletin 18/9/2025**

(Full article overleaf)

The "Life in the Spirit" Prayer Group at [St Joan of Arc Catholic Church](#) in Farnham celebrated its 45th anniversary on Saturday 13 September. The group marked the important milestone with an uplifting Mass in the church followed by a series of talks.

To find out more [click here](#).

PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

Farnham Prayer Group Marks An Important Milestone

September 16, 2025

ARTICLE IN A&B WEBSITE



The "Life in the Spirit" Prayer Group at [St Joan of Arc Catholic Church](#) in Farnham celebrated its 45th anniversary on Saturday 13 September. The group marked the important milestone with an uplifting Mass in the church, celebrated by Fr Paul Leonard from Basingstoke, followed by praise & worship in the Parish Centre, a talk about the history of the group from current leader Alastair Emblem, and a presentation from guest speakers Charles and Sue Whitehead, who founded the [Celebrate](#) Family Conferences.

The "Life in the Spirit" Prayer Group has convened weekly (with almost no breaks) since 1980, when it was founded by former Parish Priest, Fr Michael Albion (d. 1981). Speaking in a recorded message to the group, Bishop Richard said:

"Congratulations on [your] 45th anniversary... I remember Fr Albion very well since he taught me at the seminary, I know that he would have been a great inspiration... The prayers of the group over so many years will have brought many blessings to members, and the wider community alike, and I assure you of my prayers for the future."

As well as gathering every Wednesday evening for prayer, praise, teaching and discussion, the group has run a range of "faith deepening" courses for the wider parish and beyond over the decades, including Life in the Spirit seminars; Alpha and Café courses; Healing Ministry Training; and two Parish Missions in 1996 and 2013. They have also offered Taizé evenings, Holy Hours and Healing services for the parish.

Originally known as the "Parish Prayer Group" - as they were the only such group for many years - they later changed their name to the "Life in the Spirit" to distinguish themselves from other prayer groups which later started up including: Mothers' Prayers, Fathers' Prayers, the Meditation Group, the Rosary Group, and the Bible Study Group.

The high point of Saturday's celebrations was Charles and Sue Whitehead's inspiring presentation. Charles worked in leadership in charismatic renewal for many years, including eleven years as chair of [CHARIS](#), the International Catholic Renewal Organisation in Rome, under Pope John Paul II.

PRAYER GROUP 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS. 13th September 2025

Speaking to attendees, Charles and Sue recounted how their faith had come alive through the Holy Spirit, their involvement running a Prayer Group, and working in charismatic renewal – a movement described by Pope Francis as "a current of grace of the Spirit for all the Church."

The celebrations concluded with a shared buffet lunch and lively fellowship – renewing old friendships and making new ones. One participant remarked: "[It] was such an uplifting day! It answered so many questions I had." Reflecting after the anniversary, Alastair, who has led the group since 1992, said:

"Our founder, Fr Michael, was apparently a very joyful character and we have always tried to emphasise the Joy of the Gospel in our prayer and praise. Numbers attending have fluctuated over the years, ranging from a handful to over 20... One of our former members became a professor of theology and another is a trainer of catechists. As well as St Joan's parishioners, we welcome attendees from other local parishes and denominations."

Full message from Dr. William Newton, former member of Prayer Group

I remember with real gratitude the time that I spent in Farnham and the most important element of that time was definitely the formation and fellowship that I received through the parish and particularly the prayer group. At that time in my life I had had an adult conversion just a year or so before and the prayer group became a real home for me and in a sense it was like a greenhouse protecting me as a little sapling. So I could say that basically the prayer group and the community were absolutely essential for me at that time in my life to foster me in my faith.

I had no idea of course at that time where Providence would lead me. I remember Alastair once you giving me a word in the prayer group which related to what our Lord says to Peter at the end of John's Gospel concerning somebody leading him where he would rather not go. In many ways living abroad is a difficult thing - I think that's particularly the case since we moved to the US. I certainly believe that I'm doing what the Lord wants but there is a sense in which I do think now and then of the word you gave me then and wonder whether it relates to the current experience of living away from home.

Anyway, I do thank you greatly for your kindness to me during those important years. I have no doubt that the prayer group has done great good over the many years for many people that it has existed. What is so striking is that it is a manifestation of deep fidelity to the Lord. In my limited experience prayer groups ebb and flow and they can easily peter out if there aren't people with deep conviction and fidelity to keep them going. I'm sure that my experience with the prayer group is the experience of many people who perhaps have moved on to different places, but who at one time received essential graces for the rest of their life through that prayer group.

Words that come to my mind are: 'well done good and faithful servant. enter into the joy of the master.'

With prayers, Will.

***Dr. William Newton STL, PhD, Professor of Theology, Department Chair, Theology
at Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio USA***