

RECTORS REPORT FOR 2023

This is my fifth APCM report as Rector and my 10th year of ordination this summer.

Our vision continues to focus on how we are “Christ centred and Jesus shaped” for our communities, that offers a simpler, humbler, bolder church to meet the needs of those we serve in our parishes. The 3 focus strands, which sit alongside the 5 Marks of Mission, are:

1. a church of missionary disciples : through prayer, worship and scripture
2. a church where mixed ecology is the norm : through parish, chaplaincy, Fresh Expressions, digital and church planting
3. a younger and more diverse church : multigenerational, all age and looking like the community we serve

As I hope you will read in this report, there is much to celebrate that is happening within our churches and in supporting our wider communities. There is much to celebrate about 2023 which I hope you will read in this report.

CLERGY

Revd Lulu and Ven David continued to support me alongside Revd Angela in leading services across the benefice. Revd Lynda Randall helps out occasionally and Revd Arthur continues to offer time to the Renew Café. Without our retired clergy support we wouldn't be able to offer all that we do offer.

In my 2022 report I referred to advertising for a House for Duty Assistant Priest. Unfortunately, after three rounds of advertising we did not get any successful applicants. Following a conversation with the diocese they agreed to invest in the benefice by providing 5 years top-up finance for us to advertise a full-time stipendiary post. Towards the end of 2022 we interviewed and appointed Revd Greg Roberts – his licensing service was at the end of January 2024. We look forward to hearing more about Greg's ministry amongst us in next year's report.

Revd Angela has continued to bless the benefice with her preaching and teaching in this her final year as our curate. During 2024 she will be looking for her first incumbency and I am sure you will join me in praying for the process of discernment, application and interview which she and Chris now enter.

My role as Rector continues to include 'things they never taught you in theological college'. As I said in last year's report, there is a considerable number of administrative duties which go with 5 churches, often meaning I take the lead to deal with new benefice issues or crises – of which there continue to have been many property and pastoral challenges. The place of prayer, pastoral care, preaching and teaching needs equal amounts of my time and attention.

LAY MINISTER AND OFFICERS

The Ministry Team consists of clergy, licensed lay ministers and our Children and Families Worker. We continue to meet monthly and had one Away Days during the year.

John Booth and Chris Hammett regularly lead worship and preach both in church and on zoom. Jane Jakes was licensed as a Reader and like John and Chris regularly leads and preaches in church and on zoom. Jane Small continues to visit people in their homes taking home communion to them. Dawn Valentine as our Parish Evangelist offers an invaluable ministry to residents at Brook House. Claire Reetz completed the final module of her course and as well as working with Children and Families across the benefice she also was involved in some diocese training to support the wider deanery. Over the summer Claire was appointed as a Chaplain at Milton Keynes Hospital. This has meant we have a vacancy for a Children & Families Leader. Claire continues to hold a license as a lay minister and helped out with services at Christmas. Claire's departure from the team meant that from September covering the weekly

sessions of Tots Own and Little Sprouts as well as schools visits for Collective Worship / Assemblies and preparing classes for Family Worship became my responsibility, along with support from Revd Angela. The benefice office team, Sara and Michelle, have both settled into their roles well and are supporting a great deal of administration that goes on behind the scenes. During 2023 they had to move out of the Chantry Office in order for work to take place. This unfortunately has taken much longer than anticipated due to the complex nature of renovating.

The churchwardens in 4 parishes continued to serve for 2023, although for a large chunk of the year one churchwarden had to step back from their duties for personal reasons. At the APCM we added a deputy Churchwarden to Towcester. I am immensely grateful to those who undertake this responsibility, and those who enable the day to day running of our churches including those serving on the PCCs, some in more visible ways and others more hidden but no less vital. With fewer people coming forward to volunteer for roles our Churchwardens have picked up a lot of things that others used to do, or when covering for sickness. This is particularly so in Greens Norton where Ann Tolley has stepped up to cover a whole host of additional roles. Rather than people grumbling that something is not right or not been done, please can I ask across our churches that I hear you saying “good morning [churchwarden] how may I help you today?”

We had a full complement of PCC officers for the vast majority of 2023, although at the end of the year Chris Hammett has needed to step down as treasurer for St Bartholomew’s as he took up a national role for the Central Readers Council. As a benefice we are not alone in struggling to recruit volunteers, particularly for roles that require a significant commitment of time. From my conversations with other clergy in the diocese and the wider church this is a repeated challenge. If we look at alternative treasurer options that may mean we need to start paying for someone to ‘look after the books’.

In Towcester and Greens Norton, we are also grateful for the servers and sacristan who set up and support communion services. Unfortunately, Caroline Sheild in Greens Norton has not been able to carry out her role as she would have liked due to family health issues which have rightly meant her focus and time. During the year Chris Williams and Melaine Price have faithfully helped out at communion services. Terry Healy has also helped crucifer at some of the bigger services. Chris has had trouble with her knees and this was a worry in the year as to whether she could continue or not. Fay Tennant has stepped in on occasions to help. We are always looking for new people to support this part of our church life and tradition so if anyone feels they would like to find out more please speak with Chris.

WORSHIP

Our regular worship pattern has settled into one that offers both in church and online worship. Sunday worship includes communion, informal and lay led services for which we are heavily reliant on our lay readers, John Booth, Chris Hammett and Jane Jakes. We continue to offer service from Common Worship (in both traditional and modern language) as well as Book of Common Prayer Communion. During 2023 we had to make the decision to stop regular Evening Prayer at Bradden due to capacity and dwindling numbers. During this year Revd Angela and Chris Hammett continue to offer the seasonal addition of Night Prayer (Compline) via zoom during Advent and Lent.

Our Sunday attendance figures fluctuate and some still have not returned to pre-COVID levels – this is not through lack of communication or advertising. As you will see from the Children and Families Worker report, Family Worship in both Greens Norton and Towcester attendance is promising. This is largely down to baptism families and our work with our church schools but we also have a nice core of families who are beginning to attend every month.

We also have a lovely and regular zoom congregation, there is a good core number in the teens and others who dip in and out depending on where they are and what they are doing. The worship and fellowship that this group offers should not be underestimated.

I am delighted to see people who are willing to travel to other churches if there is not a preferred service in their church on a particular Sunday. Please don't tell me the clergy are not visible enough if you are not prepared to travel to another church on a Sunday morning or willing to make the effort to attend a benefice service that is not in your church.

As I mentioned in last year's report outside of Sunday worship there is a considerable amount of other 'leading worship' that takes place. As you will see from the occasional office figures we continue to take a large number of baptisms, weddings and funerals each year. This not only provides income to the parishes, which in turn helps us pay our parish share, but also generates pastoral opportunities. I am grateful to the small and dedicated team of volunteers who act as welcomers at these services. This role is sometimes called verging or sides-person and is essentially preparing the church, welcoming visitors and assisting the clergy person as is necessary. If you think you can help with this please speak with the office, Revd Paula or Revd Greg.

Alongside occasional offices there is also our leading worship / assemblies in all four primary schools, both in school and in church. Again, these are a great opportunity to welcome parents and carers into church to share with them the gospel. I was encouraged at both Harvest and Christmas with the numbers of people who offered to verge for the schools services – this really does make a difference. Thank you!

Family Worship (what was Family Service and Family Praise) has continued to be something we have worked harder on to develop as an intergenerational model. There is still more we could do and it would be wonderful to see children involved in the planning of the worship. In my 2022 report I listed five areas of priority: God Centred, Process, Engaging Participation, Pathways and Wider Community. The first three have been a focus for 2023 with varying amounts of success as we move forward in 2024, with new members of the Ministry Team, we look forward to developing this even further.

Remembrance Season started with All Saints and All Souls services; thanks are extended to Revd Lulu and John Booth who supported me in the leading of these. Remembrance Sunday saw well attend events and once again a number of younger veterans within our congregations.

Christmas on the whole also saw good turnouts of congregations. The benefice choir came together for both Advent and Christmas Carol services, thanks to all involved in preparing music and readings. Christingle and Crib Services were well attended. Carols in the pub before the 11pm service is in its second year and continue to have a good following with some following us up to church for the Christmas Communion. We held services in church for 3 of our 4 Primary Schools and for year 7 from Sponne. We visited Marie Weller lead a Christmas Assembly there. All four churches were represented at the Churches Together Carols in the Square here was a good number and the atmosphere was positive and cheerful.

LEARNING AND PRAYER

Throughout the year John Booth has led a Bible Study group which continues to meet in person at the Chantry House.

Morning Prayer is still said via zoom Monday to Saturday at 9am (except the first Tuesday of the month when there is a 9am communion service at St Lawrence). Faithfully the Greens Norton Wednesday Prayer Group still meets at 3:30pm in church and is always willing to welcome new people.

During Lent, we offered a confirmation course which resulted in 6 candidates confirmed by Bishop Ed. In Advent, we offered 3 discussion groups (lead by John, Revd Angela & Revd Paula) where we followed Eugene Peterson's Mary (Drawn In Bible Study).

The Benefice Mothers Union group continues to meet for worship, fellowship and guest speakers. We are grateful for their loyal support of work with families.

OCCASIONAL OFFICES

During 2023 the clergy and lay ministers officiated at 30 baptisms, 4 weddings and 32 funerals. Compared to 2022 when it was 41 baptisms, 5 weddings, and 41 funerals; and in 2021: 19 baptisms, 14 weddings, and 40 funerals. Over the 5 years (2019-2023) we have averaged 26 baptisms, 7 weddings and 34 funerals.

PASTORAL CARE

Much of this work goes unnoticed, and rightly so, but should not be unaccounted for. This should not be something that just the clergy do, but something that we all share in. I am grateful to those who do keep in regular contact with one another - that is a real blessing. The clergy are not in the same church week after week so please if you see someone has not been for a few weeks or you hear that they are unwell please mention it to a member of the ministry team who will pass that information on to myself or Revd Greg.

During 2023 we continued to take services in our local residential and nursing homes. On a monthly basis we visit Brook House, Ridgway House, The Lakes and Duncote Hall. These are a mixture of communion and hymn sandwich services. Thanks to Kim Proctor, John Smith and Chris Williams who support the Ministry Team every month and to Jaki, Jane and Dawn who help out occasionally.

Coffee mornings continue in Towcester on a Friday and Greens Norton on Saturdays. It is good to also be sharing coffee (& tea) after services and an opportunity to get to speak to one another. If you see a new person please do invite them to stay for tea and coffee after the service.

BUILDINGS

Quinquennial (QQ) works in Easton Neston and Bradden are now complete. Within the wider community of Bradden the responsibility for the Village Hall in Bradden moved from Lord of the Manor, Incumbent and Churchwarden to separate charity with new trustees. My thanks are extended to Colin Musgrave and David Pickering for their work on this in researching original documents and liaising with the Charity Commission. The Village Hall is currently undergoing extensive renovation work through grants and other sources of charitable giving.

Towcester has struggled to get quotes for the stone repairs in 2023, but we are hopefully moving this further forward in 2024. The renovation work began over the summer of 2023 in the Chantry with the upstairs Sponne Hall and St Lawrence Room being completely redecorated and new carpets fitted. In September the office made the temporary move to the St Lawrence Room in order for larger scale work

being undertaken in the Jenkinson Room and Office. Unfortunately, no sooner had this work started than it stopped due to the uncovering of original timber frame beams and significant levels of damp. This required structural surveys and conversations with the Historic Buildings Conversation Officer. As we moved into 2024 agreements have been reached and the work has resumed which appears to be on schedule. Although the wet weather has not helped with the timelines for walls and plaster to dry out.

Greens Norton has made some progress on their QQ repairs. The work on the churchyard wall and trees has now been completed. Towards the end of 2023 there were issues with the boiler which meant for a period of few weeks church moved to the community centre. The age and replacement of the boiler has been discussed many, many times over the years, with a general desire of 'let's get through one more winter' unfortunately not being possible this time. We want our churches to be welcoming and this begins with boilers / heating systems that are effective, reliable and efficient. There were a number of concerns about the piping from the mains to the boiler room and if needed this could have made for a much more expensive task. At the time of writing this report the new boiler has now been fitted, and the extra risk of piping costs were not incurred which is great news.

The Rural Community Energy Fund (RCEF) feasibility study and desire to work towards net-zero / carbon neutral may have appeared to go quiet this year, but there have been things bubbling on in the background. As you will read from Bradden's Churchwarden report they have had the Diocese Advisory Council (DAC) to review their heating provision and they have been advised not to change it as it is efficient. Whilst Towcester will during 2024 look at alternatives to its heating provision.

CHARITABLE GIVING

Whilst this section says a lot about the collection type stewardship undertaken, let us not forget the many members of our benefice who give freely of their time – thank you to each and every one of you.

During 2023 we continued to be involved in humanitarian aid provision for the Ukrainian War. With a number of trips taken by Oleh, Alex Donaldson, Alan Gilbert and Steve Challen. The team also supported a number of trips which Paul Parsons was involved in.

As well as our support the work of the Foodbank and during August we invited Paul Stoppard from the charity to speak to congregations at Greens Norton and Towcester about their work. Many people from across the benefice support as trustees or with their time helping with sessions, please know that this does not go unnoticed.

We supported the Royal British Legion through our Remembrance Sunday collection and the Children's Society with Christingle Service collections. At Christmas we delivered 50 meals across the benefice to people who would otherwise be on their own at Christmas. We continue to provide collection points for the Foodbank and we invited both the Foodbank and Renew Café to come and speak to our congregations about their work. During October (Harvest) we had a particular focus on the Foodbank with collections of items at services across the benefice. Churches Together Carols in the Square collection supported the Towcester Foodbank and WaterAid.

Throughout 2023 we have supported Baby Basics in Northampton and their work in providing Moses' baskets filled with essential items for new born babies and their mothers. Over the summer we became a drop off point for them, to come and collect items gathered about once every 6 weeks.

Mental Wellbeing has been identified by PCCs as an area for focus, within the Chantry House we have hosted for many years 'Time 2 Talk'. In addition to their one to one counselling session they set up at the beginning of 2023 a wellbeing drop in café (for young people and parents). Additionally, Sheleigh Chapman from the Renew Café came to speak at both Greens Norton and Towcester about the work

that they do and how churches and individuals might support them. At the Harvest Lunch in Bradden they invited Chris Hammett to speak about the work of Renew.

For many years, Friday Coffee Mornings in Towcester have supported the Delhi Brotherhood's work with children on the street and this continues with 50% of takings going towards this vital ministry.

SOCIAL AND OUTREACH

2023 saw lots of activities take place across the benefice some of these had a fundraising focus, some a more outreach and social focus. Once again, each church undertook events based on their own capacity. I don't want to try and list everything because I am bound to miss something or someone. From our fete type events in Towcester and Greens Norton. A whole host of concerts and groups – Bach Cello, Organ, Jazz, Choirs, etc. Through to the social events at Harvest and Lent including the Whirly Gigs. Coffee mornings are mentioned above in terms of charitable giving, but they also provide an important avenue for fellowship – it has been lovely to see these grow and develop during 2023.

LOOKING FORWARD

I am excited by what is in store for us in 2024. Whilst there will be goodbyes to say as at some point as we expect Revd Angela and Chris to move on to pastures new. There will also be a number of welcomes in terms of Revd Greg Roberts and Nigel Clent, as our new curate, and his wife Jane. It will also be good to welcome a new Children and Families Leader and to see where our ministry with children and families develops and grows. We continue to be a busy benefice which in some ways is a good thing but there are times when all the spinning plates feel like they are going to fall off. Whilst what we see or perceive on Sunday morning as dwindling congregations this does not really show the true and full nature of the life across our benefice. We see glimpses of God at work in the most surprising of places if we just take time to look. We are seeing people asking questions about faith and joining us for worship. We are seeing church members supporting the life of our churches, our communities and much wider afield, with their time and their talents. Lest you not forget that the growth of the Kingdom of God is not limited to the boundaries of the Tove Benefice. Even on those days when it feels like it's an uphill struggle, God is good.

Finally, I would like to say thank you to the Ministry Team, Benefice Office staff, Churchwardens and PCC members for the care and support they continue to show me. I continue to be excited about the future and believe that God does indeed have a plan for the churches and communities of the Tove Benefice.

January saw the arrival Revd Greg as Associate Priest.

February – Christianity Explored

March

April – Revd Angela announced that she would be leaving the benefice to take up first incumbency in Norwich Diocese at the Nar Valley Group. PCC looked at deanery questions and statistical data that meant we could start to explore parish mission opportunities.

May – Churchwardens and Ministry Team began exploring priorities for Mission across the benefice. Announced Sarah Barnett would be joining us as Children and Families Leader from September.