

The Rector's Benefice Report 2023

2023 saw the third in a sequence of significant royal events with King Charles' coronation. The Benefice Choir contributed to a special service on the eve, giving us a chance to pray for him personally prior to the ceremony, as well as marking the beginning of his reign.

Apart from the relatively high number of weddings (8) – a carry-over from Covid – I suspect a new baseline has been established for 'Life Events'. Baptisms peaked in 2022: in 2023 there were 4. We continue to play a significant role with church funerals (20) – mostly due to our open churchyards and the cemetery at Acle – but receive few requests to perform services at crematoria (2). Sometimes we are subsequently asked to inter the resultant cremated remains in our churchyards, bringing at least limited contact with local bereaved families.

It is almost inevitable that each year will see the death of at least one church member. Every death is important; but 2023 stands out for three somewhat unexpected and significant losses: 'Mrs. Freethorpe', Janet Church, in January; Beighton's stalwart, Tess Trueman, in August and Acle's well-loved organist, Brian Bemment, in October. While we continue to miss their presence and the valuable service they gave, we can also give thanks for the faith which gives us assurance at the end of their earthly lives.

Despite rising costs impacting on individuals and organisations, it was good to see a significant improvement in our payment of Parish Share, contributing 90% (2022: 81%) of what was requested. Once again Reedham and Beighton with Moulton paid in full; while Acle almost did. Even parishes lower down the percentage scale made it a priority in the presence of other significant financial demands – thank you for that.

Our smallest churches benefited greatly from the energy, generosity and expertise of their *Friends* groups. At Wickhampton important weather-proofing and plasterwork repairs were carried out; while at Limpenhoe Michael Brook's memorial daffodils weren't the only things blooming: *Champing* (registered trademark!) and the Breakfast Café (in welcome partnership with the Village Hall) are proving stunningly successful. Congratulations to Reedham for gaining their bronze *Eco-church* award during the year: others, please look to them for inspiration!

A new development in Acle was the monthly ecumenical service at Swallowtail Place (the new housing-with-care establishment); Christians from the wider village underpinning those who join us from the residential community. In December we were able to extend this to a more open service of *Coffee-bar Carols*, attended by a wider range of residents and staff.

The welcome presence of the Sisters of Bethany in our benefice was consolidated by their purchase of a house on Porter's Road (Moulton St. Mary); and by their licensing / authorisation by the Bishop to minister within the Diocese. They provided a programme of weekly *Encounters with Jesus* in Lent and contributed monthly to worship in some of our churches.

Although we function much of the time as a federation of 7 separate parishes, it is good when we take the chance to come together and support each other. The retirement of Lay Minister Vic Walsham from his much-appreciated conducting of Acle's monthly Morning Worship necessitated a change in our pattern; the welcome response of our Freethorpe and Reedham Authorised Worship Assistants was to agree to alternate in leading Morning Worship at Beighton, sometimes bringing other congregation members with them. Beighton's bi-monthly Holy Communion is now a benefice service in all but name; but it seems the increase in the number of opportunities to worship together has resulted in more frequent opting out, as attendances are nowhere near pre-Covid levels. Thankfully the joy of being together always overrides the potential disappointment of counting the congregation. That was also true of the initiative of holding a bring and share benefice Harvest Lunch, enjoyed by those who attended.

Parish-level worship is, however, the order of the day in the run-up to Christmas, when we make the most of the opportunities to celebrate the birth of Jesus with our local communities and institutions. December 2023 felt particularly demanding and, ultimately, rewarding: uplifting celebrations in Wickhampton and (for the first time for many years) Cantley churches come to mind; as well as the gift of a Carol Service at St. Edmund's from Ormesby-based singers and players. Thank you to all who made something special of each celebration; just as, throughout the year, you make ministry in Acle & Bure to Yare Benefice not only possible, but enjoyable, as we share our common life in Jesus Christ.

Martin Greenland