

The Rector's Benefice Report 2024

With seven parishes to cover (plus Rural Dean responsibilities) I recognise I am thinly spread; and it's hard to be part of all those communities in which I don't live. So I welcome occasional opportunities to participate in significant community events – like Reedham's 80th anniversary commemoration of the loss of life when two American bombers collided over the marshes.

Significant contact with the wider community also comes through the 'Life Events' I am asked to conduct (with welcome funeral assistance from Nicholas Cowen). The number of baptisms (2 in 2024) is declining; weddings (5) are back to normal after 2023's Covid-inflated total. Funeral figures were also normal (24 in church + 4 elsewhere; none in July/Aug, but an intense Oct/Nov). There were just 2 interments of ashes where the deceased hadn't had a Church of England funeral. That said, the long-term downward trend in parochial fee income in the diocese suggests that maintaining this level of church funerals may actually be a notable achievement. Undoubtedly our open churchyards (and nearby cemetery at Acle) contribute to that – thank you to those who care for them or facilitate the associated services in church. Meanwhile, meaningful contact with children in two of our primary schools continues through the commitment of our *Open the Book* team: full credit to them.

In a similar vein, as church attendance continues to reduce, we need to make the most of occasions when we can join, or be joined by, other members of our communities – perhaps when we share a common interest. There were several creditable examples during the year. At Freethorpe, inviting the Bishop of Thetford to dedicate the new porch doors at an informal gathering on a Saturday afternoon (when the Canaries weren't playing at home!) provided a fitting and accessible way of paying tribute to Janet Church, and a life so obviously shaped by Christian faith. In September the *Celebrating Nature* ecumenical service was attended by over 80 people; and more participated in the exhibition in the church hall. And, running through the year, the frequent and varied *Access 4 Acle* entertainments (something, surely, to suit all tastes!) have attracted good numbers from beyond the congregation to help respond to a practical problem. Establishing a Friends Group further encourages that kind of engagement to contribute significantly to the upkeep and use of the church building. It also tends to be reflected by relatively high attendance at festival services. That is certainly the case at Wickhampton, and at Limpenhoe, where partnership with the village hall (e.g. the *Breakfast Café*) and *Champing*TM go from strength to strength.

I also feel we need to make the most of the opportunities to support each other. PCCs are shrinking in size, with key members fulfilling more than one role. Although that reduces the available time, mutual support can be beneficial – if only to know that 'you are not alone.' PCC Treasurers have to meet annually to consider Parish Share. Efforts to convene our Authorised Worship Assistants and (separately) Parish Safeguarding Officers faltered in 2024, but have since borne fruit early in 2025. There's been no repeat of the 2023 meeting of Fabric Officers, but I still encourage them to share and seek each other's expertise.

Worshipping together is another way of encouraging one another – as well as of allowing God to speak to us through a different setting and congregation. I sometimes catch people saying, 'We haven't got a service next Sunday': I would respond, 'You do – it's just in a different place!' Sadly, average attendance at the four "normal" benefice services in the second half of the year was just 19. Numbers were higher for Plough Sunday (26), Mothering Sunday (28), Easter (32) and the APCM (38). There were also the welcome occasions when we came together ecumenically – particularly with the Methodists based in Freethorpe and Acle.

Worship is the main thing we do – even more so as our capacity for other activities reduces. We should give it a high priority. Thankfully it puts us in touch with a God who cannot age or decline: we mustn't mistake decreasing involvement in the Church of England for a weakening of the truth or effectiveness of Christian faith. The New Testament shows us the Church in its early days: for the most part, small groups of believers meeting on the edge of an unconducive, if not hostile, culture (whether Jewish or Roman) – look what sprang from them! But they didn't have the simultaneous challenge of maintaining the institutional and built infrastructure of a now-past Christendom: I thank all those who share with me in going some way to meet that impossible task; and even more so, who continue to witness to and live the enduring Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Martin Greenland