

## The Rector's Benefice Report 2025

While church life and ministry certainly didn't get any easier in 2025, there were plenty of hopeful and joyful experiences to encourage and sustain us. That trend can be seen in our marking of life events: I fear we saw the beginning of a downward turn in the number of church funerals (18) – a pattern that has continued into 2026. There was only one funeral at a crematorium, but five interments of ashes where the cremation had been conducted by a civil celebrant. Two graveside funerals for a local Chinese family were a new experience. Baptisms (2) are rarely requested now; but weddings (6) held up well, together with an anniversary blessing at Wickhampton for a couple who didn't opt for a church wedding 20 years before.

While the congregation at The Limes is smaller than in the past, 2025 saw the welcome revival of Holy Communion at The Old Rectory, facilitated once a quarter by their energetic Activity Co-ordinator, supplementing Methodist-led hymn-based worship. Our service *Celebrating Care* was not received as enthusiastically as 2024's *Celebrating Nature*, although there were worthwhile contributions; but we took full advantage of the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the death of Timothy Dudley-Smith to worship with eight of his hymns in a special evening service at Limpenhoe.

The energy and success of community-based activity at Limpenhoe continues to impress, with its ongoing *Breakfast Café* and *Champing™*, together with occasional events like the successful pizza night and bat evening. When the *Acle Farmers' Market* faltered, it morphed into the *Village Market*, ensuring that it continues to contribute to community life. Another bat evening took place at Beighton; there the commitment to community is evidenced, in all but the coldest months, by the *All Saints' Drop-in*. The church is also proving a welcoming location for services where worshippers from more than one congregation gather, whether intentional (through the involvement of Freethorpe and Reedham Authorised Worship Assistants) or accidental (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Holy Communion). Presiding over such mixed assemblies, especially as many individual congregations reduce, is a positive experience.

Beighton was the venue for the Benefice Choir Carol Service, attracting another satisfyingly mixed congregation. It was good to involve members of the Choir in Reedham's revived *Carols by the River* – even if we did have to relocate to the shelter of the Lord Nelson! A less public engagement was singing at the funeral of a former member: a generous, pastoral gesture.

There was significant disappointment for the *Open the Book* team when Freethorpe Primary School withdrew their invitation; but that was followed by well-received clergy involvement for Harvest Thanksgiving and, for the first time, on Armistice Day, picking up something that had previously been staged for the now-closed primary school at Cantley.

The absence of a Methodist Minister for most of the year added to my workload in Acle; but the benefits of investing in ecumenical activity were felt, for example, at the joint Lammas Holy Communion at Tunstall and an engaging autumn study group (*Searching for Home*) in Acle. Prior to that, Sister Heidi Marie provided us with a thought-provoking series on *The Journey of Discipleship*. While the Sisters' success in identifying a demand for spiritual stimulation and refreshment at Grove Barns has meant less direct involvement in the life of our benefice, we can only welcome the additional spiritual resource in our area – and seek to take advantage of it ourselves, as our Authorised Worship Assistants and *Ladies' Christian Link* did during the year. Vacant parishes in the deanery also required increased attention during 2025; but that feels entirely justified now that the deanery is fully-staffed with clergy.

The second half of the year felt particularly affirmative for me. The invitation to become an Honorary Canon of Norwich Cathedral prompted many supportive comments; while September's diocesan Clergy Conference was also affirming of the ministry I share with a diversity of ordained colleagues, old and, refreshingly, new. I also welcome the ongoing expression of support through our parish clergy wellbeing representatives, and the willingness to back my application for a sabbatical in 2026. It all helps sustain me in ministry.

In turn, I would like to express my appreciation to all who continue to sustain the life of our parishes: in worship, governance, outreach, hospitality, communication and administration. It tends to be the special events which attract the attention of a report like this; but the continuing upholding of our established presence and programme, despite reduced resources, is impressive. If people ask me how I manage to run 7 or 8 churches I say, I don't: we do that together. Thank you sincerely for that.

Martin Greenland