



## Team Vicar's Report | Annual Parochial Church Meetings 2023

*Eastern Parishes, Leominster Team Ministry*

*Diocese of Hereford, Church of England*

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*"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

*Matthew 18:20; NRSV*

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My deep gratitude and thanks to both the Leominster Team Ministry and the Eastern Parishes for the welcome and support Dawn and I have received since our arrival in July 2022. The challenge of an international move along with getting my feet on the ground in ten parishes with our twelve Churches has been immense, but at the same time a marvellous adventure. I am thankful for the gift this appointment is proving to be.

I am thankful for the foundations that have been laid over the decades, even centuries, by those who have preceded me, and for your faithfulness to seeing the life of the Church sustained in our time. I am particularly thankful for the ministry of the Rev's Pauline Rees and Celia Rees over more than a quarter of a century in being the glue that has held much of Church life together in the Eastern Parishes of the Team through difficult times, and for the ministries they have raised up and encouraged.

We live in interesting times: a growing secularisation of society, a definite suspicion of institutionalised religion, strong individualism that undermines community life, and a pandemic that has given many the opportunity to step away from community responsibility. All this results in an aging and shrinking – and increasingly exhausted – leadership cohort in our rural Churches. These substantial changes mean that what worked for past generations mostly proves ineffective in the present. We need to take courage that this is not endemic to rural Herefordshire, nor is it endemic to the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the early Church struggled – the New Testament is proof of that – and the Dark Ages saw the Church almost defeated. We find ourselves in uncharted waters in these early decades of a new century, and are offered the opportunity for adventure and exploration of new possibilities of what it may be to be God's people in our time.

My push as we entered 2023 to an essential discipline of worship – at least one Holy Communion service each month in each of our Churches, with a possible Morning (or Evening) Prayer service as a second opportunity for congregating – is to put in place a structure that will sustain us spiritually and carry us as we explore what may emerge as we seek God's purpose for our future; and I am appreciative of the adjustment our people are making to meet the new service times.

Institutional demands can be frustrating, but like a regular pattern of worship there are other practical aspects that are necessary to survival: functioning PPC's with the required officers elected and appointed, safeguarding, contributing to the Leominster Team Ministry costs and through our Diocesan Offer meeting the cost of a Vicar for the Eastern Parishes, maintenance of our Church buildings; encouraging people to give and ensuring necessary fundraising takes place. Like washing our hands and brushing our teeth, this is all non-negotiable for health and life.

What of our future? Much of Church and Mission history suggests that the Church, like the human body, needs to breath in and out to stay alive. We find ourselves in a period of history where the Church is breathing out, a shrinking as our breath is expelled and increasingly at that point where we wonder if we have anything left to expel. In reality we have resources, both practical and spiritual to



sustain us, reserves on which we can draw, and when we look in our baskets and see only a few fish and some loaves of bread, we remember that these are the staples of miraculous provision.

Our future hangs on our willingness to explore God's purpose for us, and to have the courage to change; while remaining thankful for structures that have proved useful in the past, being open to new ways of relating in order to use effectively the resources God gives us. I am committed to finding ways to strengthen our commitment to both the Leominster Team Ministry and our existence as the Eastern Parishes, while at the same time seeking to nurture the diversity and unique purpose of each of our Parish Church communities. The two groups (Kimbolton and Stoke Prior) within the Eastern Parishes have served us well, but I am wondering if our diversity will not be better served in smaller clusters on a geographical basis as we develop our ministry and mission to the villages we are called to serve?

What of our purpose? In essence the Christian objective is to live out God's love indiscriminately in our world through just action and compassionate caring. To live this effectively in daily life we need to ensure we continuously respond to the call to be Christ's disciples; find ways to sustain, nurture, and deepen our spirituality; and in our acts of service within the village communities in which God has placed us, to be the light and love of God to others.

I look forward to our journey in the months that lie ahead, and to working together with you all in this beautiful part of God's vineyard.

A prayer for our pilgrimage (attributed to St Ignatius of Loyola):

*Lord, teach me to be generous,  
teach me to serve you as you deserve,  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labour and not to seek reward,  
save that of knowing I do your will, O Lord.*

In thanksgiving for you all

MARK R D LONG  
Team Vicar for the Eastern Parishes