



Team Vicar's Report | Annual Parochial Church Meetings 2024

Eastern Parishes, Leominster Team Ministry

Diocese of Hereford, Church of England

"The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." Acts 4:32; NRSV

I am hugely thankful for the generosity of time, skill, and resource that each and every Churchwarden, Secretary, Treasurer, Safeguarding Officer, and Parochial Church Council (PCC) member has committed so selflessly over the past twelve months to ensuring ministry is able to take place in and from our beautiful buildings, and that funds are raised and collected to enable this all to happen. It has made my ministry possible in your midst, and I am thankful for the support of our Team Clergy, our active retired Clergy along with our Curates and licensed Reader and Lay Minister in enabling Sunday and other services to happen with regularity throughout the Eastern Parishes; and Churchwardens willingness to step in and lead Morning Prayer on occasion when it becomes impossible to offer an ordained presence.

We had the joy of Revd Fiona Honeysett joining us last July as Deacon and Curate in training. Her presence and growing ministry among us is regularly affirmed, and we wish Fiona every blessing as she prepares to be ordained Priest at the end of June. Sadly, our reader of many years, Chris St Clair, resigned his position earlier this year and we wish him and Jo everything of the best as Chris explores his retirement and focuses his energy in new directions.

Our shift, over a year ago now, to a new rota and greater regularity of services means that we regularly have a combined Sunday attendance at services of around forty-five to fifty-five people, and our Easter Services drew a combined attendance of around one-hundred. We continue to tweak the system as needed, alongside trying a few different types of service such as a successful Pet service at Hamnish (successful in that the labradors didn't eat the guineapigs!) and a Book of Common Prayer (BCP) Evensong at Leysters.

Our School ministry has grown, too, with Fiona and I alternately leading regular weekly Worship Sessions at Kimbolton St James' Church of England Primary School, and I take a half-termly Assembly at Stoke Prior Primary School. Kimbolton School engaged in the Diocesan Pilgrimage at Ascension from Hamnish Church back to the School. We also offered the 'Experience Easter' programme at Kimbolton that was much appreciated by learners and teachers; and I spent a wonderful hour with one of the Stoke Prior classes discussing the nature and relevance of the Bible.

In reality our mission is to the crowds that turn out for Baptisms, Weddings, and Funerals, along with the 'feel good' services such as Harvest, Carols, and Easter Day. While secularism grows and people increasingly see little purpose in any regular engagement with the Church, both the embedded Christian culture in our society and peoples' spiritual awareness draws them to these gatherings, and the question we need to ask quite seriously is, 'How do we engage people in a vital relationship with the risen Christ?' and 'What do we need to offer beyond these gatherings that will engage them in regular relationship with both God and Church?'

Our future in these Eastern Parishes lies in our willingness to explore how we can support and encourage each other. The above passage from the fourth chapter of Acts may speak to a somewhat idealistic picture of the early Church as Jewish people began to discover what it meant to share their resources of faith and Divine relationship with Gentiles whom the Spirit of God appeared to welcome indiscriminately into the fellowship of those who recognised Jesus as Messiah, as Christ, as God incarnate among us. Even if idealistic, it gives precedent to Christian living and the call to share the resources God gives us, as difficult as we find it. Key to generous sharing is relationship, and I am greatly appreciative of those in our Churches who travel from week to week to Churches other than their own. The gift of refreshments after services means we have the opportunity to get to know one another over a cup of tea/coffee, and this helps break through the presumed picture we may carry of other communities.



Finance is always a challenge and thank you to all who have been involved with fundraising of one sort or another in ensuring we move towards carrying our own weight in the Team. It is important that we find a variety of ways of enabling people to give beyond just the Sunday Plate and Fundraising events. The Planned Giving Scheme (PGS) is a National Church scheme that ensures safe collection and accurate distribution into participating PCC Bank Accounts (along with any Gift Aid amounts) each month via once off or regular giving direct from people's personal accounts. It is an option that can be offered not only to regular attendees, but also to those Electoral Role members who may not often make it to services, or even local Villagers who appreciate the Church's presence but may not have a personal faith.

To those who may find some value in statistics I offer the following:

The Eastern Parishes carry 20% of the Team costs being a central administration and shared cost of the Vicars' travel (Leominster Priory carry 50% and the Western Parishes 30%). The average Eastern Parishes PCC contribution to Team costs is 2% of the total, the highest being 3% and the lowest 0.3%. This compares to the Western Parishes where the average is 3.7% with the highest being 5.2% and the lowest 2%.

The contribution to the cost of a Vicar (stipend, pension, housing, training a replacement; £60,000 for 2024) isn't set on a formula, but given via a 'Parish Offer' to the Diocese at the PCC's discretion. Positively, the increase from the Eastern Parishes in 'Parish Offer' for 2024 over 2023 was £2,299 (compared to an increase from the Western Parishes of £3,795) and means the Eastern Parishes presently pay for half a Vicar this year (the West for two thirds of a Vicar, and the Priory for one and a third Vicars). There are only four PCC's in the Team that contribute more than 10% each of the cost of a Vicar (Leominster Priory, one PCC in the East and three in the West). This means on average in the Eastern Parishes each PCC pays for 5% of the Vicar's time and attention; in reality one PCC contributes above 15%, three contribute between 6% and 7% and six contribute less than 5% (the lowest two contributing 0.8% and 0.3% respectively).

In practical terms the Diocese pays 50% of my cost and could demand that the position of Vicar for the Eastern Parishes become a 50% post, which thankfully at this stage is not a matter for discussion. However, you may now understand why I was asked to pick up the Rural Dean's responsibility (in addition to the experience I bring to the post), which thankfully with every Deanery Benefice having a Vicar in post means that the Deanery demands very little of my time; and what it does demand I enjoy doing, and supplements my ministry as Team Vicar.

The above all said and done, our primary calling as God's people is to the propagation of the Gospel in our communities. Good governance, sufficient funding, safeguarding, building and churchyard maintenance, regular services, are all a foundation from which we can launch the ministry and mission that is asked of us. Much of this is in place and we need to explore in the coming year what we need to additionally offer that will meaningfully strengthen and inspire those already faithful, and be intentional in reaching out to those around us in such a manner that they are inspired to know and serve the risen Christ.

Let us take courage together from the Prophet Isaiah:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

Isaiah 43:1b; NRSV

In thanksgiving for you all

MARK R D LONG

Team Vicar for the Eastern Parishes | April/May 2024