

## **Rector's report to the Benefice for 2017 Delivered on Sunday 28th January 2018**

We designated 2017 as our year of discipleship. A programme, or 'shape' was given to the year based around lent groups, a basics course in holy week, Thy Kingdom Come prayer week, a summer sermon series on the life of the early church (supported by three teaching evenings and home group material) and Autumn confirmation prep and 'discerning God's call for your life' course.

Attendance at the basics course was poor and we need to reflect on why. Is it that:

- people are simply not interested in Jesus
- or that we are failing to invite people to come and find out more about being a Christian,
- or that the timing/design to the course did not appeal?

Given that Church of England research shows that 20% of the population would go to church if invited by a friend I cannot believe that no one in the villages is interested in Jesus! Perhaps we need to look again at our willingness to invite others to come and find out more, and what we are offering those who might like to come.

The teaching evenings about Acts and Paul's epistles were not well attended either. I do not mind preparing material for just a dozen people. Jesus was happy to invest significantly in just twelve. But I am disappointed that there is not a greater hunger in our churches to learn more of God through his word. I know people are busy, but couldn't we spare three evenings in a year?

Consequently, the number of candidates we were able to put forward for Confirmation was few – 3 adults and 1 child. However, it was a delight to see four people, one aged in their 80s and one aged 11 pledge their allegiance to Christ. We pray for them in their journey of faith and ministry in the church.

Sunday services remain the main opportunity we have to meet together as Christians in each parish and four times a year as a benefice.

In the Autumn of 2015 we introduced a new service pattern, with each church holding its own main morning service and a new contemporary evening service being introduced in St Martin's at 7.00pm. 8.00am communion continued on a bi-weekly basis in Eynsford and Farningham. This service pattern continued unchanged through 2017 in Farningham and Lullingstone. Eynsford took the decision in Spring 2017 to close its three Sunday services and open one new weekly communion service at 9.30am, incorporating the best of the three previous services. The aim was to provide a service for the whole parish, at which all might find something of spiritual value. It was also a realistic response to Eynsford's failure to find a second church warden. This new service for St Martin's has now been reviewed by myself and the PCC and I will be writing to members of St Martin's about our thoughts.

For children we offer a weekly Sunday school in Eynsford, a Sunday school on the fourth Sunday in Lullingstone and Farningham offers two family services per month and a children's activity during communion services. REVIVE, for children in years 6-11, also meet once per month on a Sunday during the 9.30am service in St Martin's and on other Sundays can often be found sat together working the projector.

Eynsford has this year benefitted from all services being projected onto the wall; making it easier for newcomers and those suffering from dementia to follow the service, as well as the chance to see the bible reading which is not always easy to hear. The reintroduction of prayer ministry in Eynsford and Farningham, anointing with oil and the lighting of candles during communion has proved helpful to some, enabling a deeper connection with God. It is hoped that as the prayer ministry team develops its gift of listening to God through words of knowledge and prophesy that more people will find an even deeper connection.

We have tried a number of special services through the year; sometimes during the main morning service and sometimes on other occasions. Services which have been well attended and spoken of positively include: All Souls, Remembrance Sunday, crib services, and an afternoon carol service on Eynsford. Less successful was the baptism families' reunion. The three benefice choral evensongs proved popular, although they did result in reduced attendance in the morning.

Average Sunday attendance (excluding baptisms and 'special' services) for the year is as follows:

Eynsford: 40

Lullingstone: 20-25

Farningham: 25-30

In addition to Sundays we offer various opportunities to meet, worship, pray and learn together. A cycle of services takes place each week – Morning prayer with litany in Lullingstone on a Wednesday and Communion in Eynsford on a Friday. Homegroups meet either weekly or bi-weekly. We offer one-off retreat or learning days and occasional courses. For children in school years 6 to 11 there is REVIVE meeting weekly on a Wednesday in the Rectory for food, fellowship, fun and games, and learning about Jesus. In the Autumn we covered several "hot topics", including (at the children's request) sexuality and self-image. Eleven children are in regular attendance.

Our ministry to the wider community has been spiritual: we offered 10 baptisms, 8 weddings and 23 funerals (16 in church and 7 just at the crem), marked various national and local events (such as Commonwealth day and remembrance Sunday), provided a weekly assembly and governorship at the school, and clerical presence at various village activities and also social with the provisions of fairs, coffee mornings, social events and space for community meetings. We have a good relationship with our villages upon which to build.

Each baptised member of the church has been commissioned by God to witness to Jesus, to work for God's kingdom, to care for those in need. To equip 'ordinary' church members for this task is the work of our team of clergy and licenced ministers. We meet weekly on a Monday morning to pray and monthly to share fellowship, plan and learn. When we receive confirmation that Bishop James will licence Dorothy as associate rector in the benefice the ministry team will re-examine roles how we can best support the churches and their mission. The ministry team are a wonderfully diverse, and talented group, and I value them greatly. I cannot stress how blessed we all are to have Dorothy working as a full-time priest in the benefice – for free!

Our benefice, and each church within it, relies heavily on our wardens, PCC secretaries and treasurers, PCC members, and a whole host of volunteers who give their time for everything from cleaning, to running children's groups, to helping with services in many different capacities. We owe a debt of gratitude to everyone who gives of their time and money to make church in these villages possible. We also rely heavily on Tina in the office and Barrie on the organ – our paid professionals! Many thanks to them also.

So, what of the future?

The Diocese has launched its "Called Together" framework. It remains to be seen what effect, if any, this has on us. My feeling is that we are largely being asked to do what good churches are already doing. I don't think there is a great deal that is new. However, it is clear that clergy numbers are going to fall and clergy will be redeployed. We might not like this, but given the difficulty the Diocese has in raising sufficient funds to maintain even a reduced number of clergy and the number of clergy retiring it is certain to happen (in the short term at least). This was brought home to me recently when I discovered that the now united parishes of St Andrews Orpington and St Mary's Cray have a combined population of 20,000 people, two churches (with a combined weekly attendance of only 80) and only one priest. In our end of the Shoreham deanery, there are 8 churches and 5.5 clergy for the same number of people). The mission of the Church of God requires more to be done in such deprived areas.

The Benefice Council has begun to look at how we partner with other local churches, both churches of other denominations and neighbouring Anglican parishes. If clergy numbers are reduced, then it will pay to have good relationships already in place. However, the impetus for developing of partnerships comes rather from the need to present a united witness to the gospel in this area, the good sense of not duplicating what we can share and learning from and enriching each other. Our recent joint confirmation with West Kingsdown was a case in point and maybe in future joint confirmation prep will prove helpful. A recent meeting between St Martin's and Eynsford Parish Council could profitably have included the other village churches and our Autumn 'discerning God's call for your life' course could easily have included folk of other denominations.

The Benefice Council have also agreed to reinstate a benefice pastoral team. Dorothy is offering a training course in the Spring and will convene this group. We want to put in place a team, not to replace the neighbourly care offered by one church member to

another, but equipped to bring spiritual sustenance to those in need. If anyone is sensing a call to offer this kind of care then please speak to Dorothy.

We do need to continue to make the most of our Sunday services and the ministry team will continue to discern how we can do this; making the worship enriching to those who already come and attractive to visitors. St Martin's churchyard needs to be closed in the next year or two. Trinity school needs support as it opens its sixth form (I'm exploring the possibility of leading a leadership course for 6<sup>th</sup> formers).

I believe that we are in good shape. Our buildings are fit for purpose (and this year the Shand hall will surely be ours!). Our church finances are sound (ish) and the St Martin's loan should be repaid by December. We have a talented ministry team in place and many volunteers working hard to maintain our church life. When a second warden and secretary is appointed at St Martin's AGM the team should be complete. The question then is, what will we do with this wealth of resources?

Jesus calls his church, for love of God and neighbour, to point people to him and to work for his kingdom. If we become inward looking, protecting what we have for fear of losing it, God will surely remove his favour from us. If we are outward looking, generous and full of faith, hope and love, then surely God, as Jesus taught in the parable of the talents, will pour out his blessings.