

Two Rivers Mission Community Annual Report for the year ended 31st December 2023

2023 was the second full year of working with our Mission Action Plan (see appendix 2) which states that, “We are called by God to build a Christian community in each village, which will worship, pray, grow and reach out with the Gospel.”

All eleven of our church buildings are open to visitors (ten every day and one three days per week), providing a place where local residents and visitors alike can come to reflect and pray. Churches have worked hard to maintain the fabric of their buildings, to make them welcoming and to give visitors opportunity to engage with God. Four of our churches have Friends groups which offer assistance in maintaining our churches and churchyards as valuable community assets.

Our church buildings, whilst expensive to maintain, and in the current economic climate to heat, nonetheless provide very visible foci for our Christian life together and a place both from which we can reach out and welcome people in. Seven of our churches hold weekly Sunday services, two bi-monthly, one monthly and the chapel of ease at Alverdiscott quarterly. The consolidation during the year of a monthly service in Huntshaw with a congregation of up to ten local residents shows the potential to build and maintain a Christian presence in even our smallest communities. God willing, we will make more progress in 2024 towards establishing a church service in every church at the same time every week, as a focus for our worship, prayer, growth and outreach in each village.

Seven of our ten PCCs reported a growth in participants in 2023 compared to 2022, one remained static and two declined. Overall, as a mission community, we reported a growth of 5.4 participants, representing a solid 4.3% growth – bucking the general trend in the Church of England. For this we should be thankful to God and celebrate.

Numerical growth of our church congregations is of important. We believe that each person in our communities is important to God, and we pray that each will find a relationship with him through Jesus, find a spiritual home

in his church, and grow as a disciple, helping build his kingdom in their families, communities, schools, places of work and the wider world. As well as making new disciples we pray that we might attract Christians who have given up on church, both for their own benefit and so that they can make their contribution to the church and God's mission.

During 2023 we have continued to try to make the most of pastoral offices to bless our local communities and to share Jesus. We conducted 11 baptisms (14 in 2022), 22 weddings (15 in 2022) and 43 funerals and burial of ashes (34 in 2022).

Festivals and special services provided another opportunity to bless our communities, provide a Christian focus to important seasons and national events and to share Jesus. All our churches provided a religious focus to the coronation of King Charles. Agricultural services remain especially important. Christmas is always the best attended time of year. Many of our churches have created other opportunities to invite the community to join in worship, examples being pet services and all-souls services of remembrance.

To help people explore the Christian faith we ran two Alpha course in the Autumn, with five attending a morning Alpha in the Hunters Inn, Newton Tracey, and five more an evening Alpha in Beaford village hall. Four homegroups have helped church members support each other in their discipleship and grow as Christians. One off events, such as a mission community 'day together' and weekend away at Lee Abbey have provided further opportunities. In the summer, two members of the mission community completed the one year diocesan Foundations in Christian Ministry course (FiCM). One of them has now started the two year Licensed Lay Minister training scheme. Another person started the FiCM course in September. To maintain our mission and ministry in the years to come we need to continue this steady supply of people training for ministry, recognising that the help available from the diocese is only likely to decrease.

All our churches have been active in serving their local communities. Our greatest impact is probably made by church members getting involved in community life, serving on local councils, as school governors, running local community groups and leisure activities and so on. Organised church activities

have included a plethora of coffee mornings and soup lunches providing warm spaces and opportunity to build community and social events ranging from cider walks to Christmas tree festivals. St Giles provide a pastoral visiting team. We support our local schools; two community schools and two church schools, with collective worship and RE lessons. All the schools visited church for services or concerts during the year.

Julia Halpin, our parish nurse, has continued to support local groups for pre-school children and antenatal classes, as well as support for the elderly and sick in the local community. She regularly accompanies people to medical appointments. Trust has been built with statutory services and Julia is able to add additional community support which would otherwise be unavailable. Julia's diaconal ministry supports her role as parish nurse, and vice versa, and Julia has conducted several funerals of people she has helped with end of life care.

The Church of England has stated its aim to 'grow younger' and this is certainly something we need to do as churches. Our family services have struggled to attract many children and families on a regular basis. Notable exceptions have been 'alternative' services such as messy church in Atherington and Café church in Yarnscombe. Activities on days other than Sundays have met with more success: out of school club in High Bick and youth groups in Newton Tracey and Beaford, activity mornings in Roborough and tentatively in Newton Tracey. Sadly, the kids club in Beaford had to be suspended due to lack of attendance.

Members of the Two Rivers play an active part in the life of the deanery. Rev Tracey serves as rural dean, and all the deanery synod officers are drawn from our benefice. Rev Gary serves on the executive of the Exeter Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship, has represented CPAS as patron in two local clergy appointments, and shared our experiences of focal ministry with CPAS and a national focal ministry group.

During 2023 The Two Rivers Mission Community joined the newly reconstituted ecumenical Churches Together in Barnstaple. This gives us an important link to the work of God in the wider north Devon area, including the Freedom Centre, Street Pastors and Christians Against Poverty (CAP). Gary

serves on the enabling group and he and others from the Two Rivers attend the monthly prayer meeting.

It is really encouraging that each of our churches met their common fund request for 2023. We are heavily subsidised by the diocese of Exeter, especially now we have the services of a paid half time vicar and paid full time curate. The Mission Community account remains in a healthy surplus, with each parish (except Huntshaw) paying £95 into the mission community account each month. These payments are supplemented by donations from individuals. The surplus would make the appointment of a children and youth work trainee possible. If one is not appointed it may be possible to reduce the monthly payments made by churches.

In December 2023 the bishops of the Church of England commended prayers for the blessing of those in same-sex partnerships. Members of the Two Rivers Mission Community leadership team have discussed their response to this development, and it is clear that a variety of views exist within the team. Rev Gary has made the decision that the prayers will not be offered whilst he is rector. He will, however, facilitate a process whereby each PCC and church can consider its position with a view to the future.

We have worked hard on safeguarding this year, running basic and foundation courses in person to supplement the Church of England online offering. In 2024 we will offer a course to raise awareness of domestic abuse. Lynne Carter took over from Derek Birch as our safeguarding officer early in 2023.

All our work is underpinned with prayer. We began each term with a day of prayer and fasting, with prayer offered in each parish. The Autumn prayer day ended with a shared supper prior to a mission council meeting. We ran the Try Praying initiative in May, but this failed to gain the traction of the previous year. We are looking to switch back to the Thy Kingdom Come prayer initiative in 2024. Around 10 of us prayer walked in Westward Ho! as part of the South West Wave of Prayer to encircle South West England in prayer.

All that we do is only possible because of the hard work and dedication of the members of each of our churches. We still have some way to go to a full

compliment of wardens, secretaries, treasures, mission council reps and deanery synod reps for each PCC, and progress in 2024 would help put the churches on a more secure footing. But we are very blessed that where work needs to be done, people step up to the plate. Our thanks go to everyone who contributes to their local church in any way. We also offer our thanks to the retired clergy who freely give their time to enable us to share communion in each church monthly.

Each church is supported by a focal minister, and the focal ministers and other licensed ministers form the leadership team. The leadership team meets weekly for prayer on Zoom and monthly in person for vision building and planning. The arrival of Rev Cathy as half time team vicar and then Rev Ally as full-time curate has considerably boosted our team. Cathy is focusing on Tawstock and Ally on Beaford, and the time they have been able to commit to their churches and communities is paying dividends. Its also beginning to free Gary up to be able to offer more support in other churches. At the end of the year, we said farewell to our administrator, Janette, who had served us faithfully for 5 years. We look to appoint a new administrator in the Spring of 2024.

At the end of 2023 we revised our mission statement (appendix 3). Key areas to focus on for 2024 include:

- Developing local ministry teams for each parish, and other teams to deliver specific ministries across the mission community.
- Grow the opportunities for church members to go deeper in their faith and discipleship; with attention to Sunday sermons and mid-week learning opportunities.
- Looking at work with children and young people, and possibly appointing a children and youth worker trainee to support the work of churches who would appreciate it.
- Help church members to further develop the habit of generous planned giving to God's work, and for churches to support the mission of God in the wider community, country and world.
- Make the most of Gary's sabbatical in Autumn 2024

We do not know what will occur during the year ahead, but we trust that God will continue to bring to completion the good work he has begun in us.

We trust God's promise to build his church and kingdom. "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Rev Gary (Rector)

Mission Action Plan (2021-23)

We are called by God to build a Christian community in each village, which will worship, pray, grow and reach out with the Gospel.



The Bus and Crew

Local Leadership Teams (LLTs) in each parish chaired by a focal minister to oversee ministry in each parish.

Mission Council Leadership Team (MCLT) made up of rector, focal ministers and specialist ministers to set Mission community vision. A working party of the Joint Council.

Form a Joint Council to provide legal oversight of the Mission Community. This will replace the Mission Community Council.

Rector to act as chair of the MCLT and train and support focal ministers and local ministry teams. Sundays spent moving around the parishes.

**Which route do we need to take?
What are the stops along the way?**

Authentic, attractive, all-age Christian communities doing life together. Meeting together more than just on a Sunday. Focused on local community—personal relationships, enculturation.

People being converted to Christ, growing as disciples and equipped to live as whole life disciples, intentionally working to build God's Kingdom. Our communities and the wider world being transformed by the love of God, through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

Parish nursing; Anna chaplaincy, practical action in local communities; support of Christian mission agencies.

	Connect	Hear and respond	Grow	Lead
Under 5				
Primary				
Youth				
Adults				
All-age				

Finances, administration and buildings directed towards these goals. Joint Council. Better administration; sharing of skills for faculties, finances, grant applications etc. Each church paying its way. Realistic planned giving. All buildings fit for purpose and well maintained. Teams for ongoing maintenance. Generous giving of parishes to God's work elsewhere.

Values

- Love
- Faith
- Word and Spirit
- Generosity
- Joy

What does the destination look like?

Authentic, attractive, all-age Christian communities, doing life together.

People being converted to Christ, growing as disciples and equipped to live as whole life disciples, intentionally working to build God's kingdom.

Our communities and the wider world being transformed by the love of God, through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

Finances, administration and buildings directed towards these goals.



Mission Action Plan (2024)

The Two Rivers Mission Community The journey ahead...

Values
Love
Faith
Word and Spirit
Generosity
Joy

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The sign on the front of our bus
We are called by God to build a Christian community in each village, which will worship, pray, grow and reach out with the Gospel..

The bus and crew Next steps...
Develop local ministry teams
Exit strategy for focal ministers
Develop teams for specific ministries
Appoint an administrator
Appoint a youth and children's worker?
How to deploy our LLM in training?

**Which route do we need to take?
What are the stops along the way?**

	Connect	Hear and respond	Grow	Lead
Under 5				
Primary				
Youth				
Adults				
All-age				

Continue to work on the grid above to help us make and grow disciples
Develop preaching /teaching ministry on Sundays
Develop other opportunities for the spiritual growth of church members
We've largely splintered with churches doing their own thing on days they choose - is this the best use of resources?
Children and youth: develop ministries on days other than Sunday
Possibly toddler church, messy church etc monthly in four churches, so people who wanted could go weekly.
Help congregation members develop the habit of regular planned generous giving
Churches develop missionary giving and action beyond the local parish
How to make the best use of Gary's sabbatical?
Think through our response to LLF and how we can prepare well for the future