

The Rector's Benefice Report 2020

2020 will be remembered as the (first?) year of the Coronavirus pandemic. A stop/start year dominated by the ebb and flow of restrictions: they could tighten with little or no notice; while any promise of easing was generally followed by a period of uncertainty, waiting for detailed guidance from the Government, which often arrived at the last minute. Planning became simultaneously essential (because of the legal requirement to assess and manage the risks) and impossible – because one didn't know quite what would be permitted when the time came! Remembrance Sunday was a case in point: initially it wasn't clear whether any gatherings would be allowed. When it was established that they would, churches and Parish Councils started planning commemorations, with restricted attendance and obligatory precautions. But then we were struck by the November lockdown: services in churches could no longer take place; and only the barest minimum of people could gather outside – but with the unexpected element that it would be permissible to sing!

The year began conventionally enough, with Covenant Services with the Methodists; Plough Sunday at Wickhampton; a couple of baptisms at Freethorpe; the Prayer Walk and the start of a Lent Group at Acle. Freethorpe sadly lost Nicky Edelsten in February. At her funeral, mourners, many travelling from outside Norfolk, gathered in Halvergate Church; some wanted me to shake hands with them at the door, others definitely didn't – it was then that I started to wonder, in the light of the news from elsewhere, if this was something we should still be doing. All too soon it would become clear that, unlike previous epidemics, this wasn't going to be something we could weather simply by not sharing the common cup at Communion and not shaking hands at the Peace.

The issuing of the *Stay at Home* instruction in March put a stop to normal parish life. Gathering in church on a Sunday is so fundamental to us; but in finding ways to manage without it we were severely hampered by the guidance not to distribute material to people's homes – Mothering Sunday flowers were to be the last items to be taken around for a while. Everything was moving on-line; but given the age-group of most of our church members, a significant number didn't have access or weren't comfortable with the technology – and there was no time to put anything else in place. Many people would have to make do with phone calls and increased provision on radio and television. Practical support was available to those who needed it from Parish Councils and local volunteers – some of them church members. Support was also offered through local foodbanks. Most of us set about acquiring new computer skills. Initially services were posted on the benefice website; which also pointed people to other provision, such as the Diocese of Norwich podcast, or Norwich Cathedral's *You-tube* channel. But in May, Simon Ash prompted and enabled us to start worshipping by the video meeting platform *Zoom*. This recommended itself because worship could still be live and participative. We may not have got the large number of hits from outsiders reported by some parishes who posted recorded worship, but we benefitted from seeing each other, even if only on screen – indeed the services helpfully brought together people from different churches, with attendance peaking at about 40. We continued *Zoom* services throughout the year, even when it was possible to hold limited services in churches: this continuity was helpful for those shielding and when later lockdowns were imposed. We also recorded videos for Remembrance Sunday and for our Primary Schools and families at Christmas – thank you, again, to Simon, Kati Cowen, Diana Gilder and all who supported these productions.

We also need to express gratitude to our churchwardens (and those assisting them) who were delegated with the responsibility for making our buildings "Covid secure" for those coming privately during the week, or when physical service were permitted. It was often easiest in the smaller parishes, where the required gatherings could readily be accommodated in over-large parish churches. It was more difficult at Freethorpe; and at Acle, where the pews are too close together and three different congregations (including Roman Catholics) were accustomed to using St. Edmund's within a 24-hour period. Use had to be rationed on an alternate-week basis; seating plans prepared safely to maximise use of the available space; and funerals scheduled away from weekends. In the absence of churchwardens, the Rector became what the regulations call a "venue manager"; I'm grateful to Vic Walsham, Rodney Edrich and verger Tracey Caston for their support; and also to Acle's rejuvenated team of cleaning volunteers: essential for virus control and since dedicated volunteers Maureen and Peter Kingsley stepped down at the year's end.

For much of the time it felt as though we were having to respond to something that was mostly happening elsewhere, as infection rates in rural Norfolk remained relatively low (it would be 2021 before they really escalated): the restrictions were having a more serious effect than the virus. But we did have a very early taste of what the virus could do, as Mike Brook, who had returned from his annual trip to the USA, contracted Covid 19, was hospitalised and tragically died. Mike had been the key office holder in the Parish of Limpenhoe, Southwood and Cantley and, as Chair of the Benefice Council, an influential figure in bringing and keeping our Benefice together. He was also a friend to many; and, of course, a husband and father. His funeral had to be held at the time when, although services in crematoria chapels were permitted, those in church were not – it was graveside only, with very limited mourners – a somewhat stark, if intimate experience. But people responded, as people often did, by doing the best they could in the circumstances: lining the route in a way that was deeply appreciated by the family. Credit also to Limpenhoe, Southwood & Cantley PCC, which quickly and effectively regrouped.

At other times people's desire to find ways around the restrictions presented a challenge: a well-managed gathering in church was not to be accompanied by an unmanaged (and illegal) congregation outside the churchyard! As might be expected, numbers of funerals held up – with the restrictions on attendance it was an extra-difficult year to lose someone. Strangely, many of the earlier funerals were at Cantley, sadly including church members Mary and (daughter) Rosemary Hanton. Rosie Bedding's flowers will be missed at Reedham; while Freethorpe lost Dorothy Grint and Acle, stalwart Evelyn Elliott. Weddings were mostly postponed, although I did still celebrate two: a summer one at Acle Church; another, after gaining the required licence, in a Reedham home.

Despite the pandemic there were some significant building works during the year. It was good to see Wickhampton's composting toilet completed before lockdown, in February. Meanwhile at Acle, the thatch appeal was only just getting underway, with a generous donation from the *Winter Beer Festival* hosted in the church hall. It was a very difficult year to be fundraising: all the more impressive that Rodney Edrich oversaw both securing the funds and completing the work before another winter struck. Beighton's rethatching and improvements were already in progress at the beginning of the year; work was able to continue, although there were delays and revisions. We were able to celebrate completion at a special service with Bishop Alan in October – although restrictions regrettably prevented use of the new kitchen facilities. Fabric Officer and Treasurer Kate Ashcroft is to be congratulated for steering and securing the funding for what turned out to be a £350K, 6-year project, resulting in a much more attractive, watertight and useable church building. Halvergate Church is also looking much better, following its replastering. Thank you to all who looked after our church buildings during the year; including Michael Turner, who stepped down at Acle – but not before he'd seen completion of the final aspects of the much-delayed boiler project.

As well as the difficulty of fundraising, the reduced number of church services affected parish income. Thanks to the efforts of PCC Treasurers and those who took steps to continue their giving, whether by bank transfer or other means, the situation was not as bad as it might have been. We paid two-thirds of our Parish Share, which, given the conditions, sounds like quite an achievement – Reedham (almost) and Limpenhoe, Southwood & Cantley paid in full. Across the Diocese the figure was slightly higher, at 72%; but the anticipated deficit of some £650K sounds more serious. This prompted a programme to reduce central costs and clergy deployment, suspending our house for duty post at Reedham, pending a likely decision to remove it.

At the end of the year (and still as I write) we are far from out of the woods; but we can thank God for bringing us through 2020: not without loss, but not without gain either; and in good humour and good heart. Thank you to everyone who made that possible. Not as much happened as in a normal year; but (rather like the length of this report!) a lot more went into anything which did.

Martin Greenland