

# CHURN BENEFICE 2030 –WHICH WAY FORWARD?

This initial discussion document tries to present some of the issues that might be important as we together try to discern the best way forward for us as a community of Christians, wanting the very best for our churches and our communities. It mostly asks questions at this stage, and we hope that these will help to stimulate discussion, reflections, thoughts, and ideas.

We hope to gather reactions to these questions between now and the end of April. Following this initial discussion period, we will produce a first draft of a Churn Benefice 2030 Plan, for further discussion by our church communities during the early Summer. It will be important to give ourselves the time and space we need to think and pray things through, but it is hoped we will be able to have an agreed plan by late Summer, with the aim of being in a position to agree how we can move things forward from September 2021.

**We welcome responses from individuals, groups, PCCs, and indeed anyone who is interested in the future of the Churn Benefice. Please send your responses c/o Benefice Administrator (Dawn Saunders) at the Churn Benefice Centre by email ([office@churnchurches.co.uk](mailto:office@churnchurches.co.uk)) or if you would prefer to talk to someone by telephone then please let the office know on 01235-850267 and we will be pleased to arrange that at a convenient time for you.**

## 1. Background

The Churn Benefice is comprised of the six Church of England parishes of Aston Tirrold and Aston Upthorpe; Blewbury; East and West Hagbourne; North Moreton; South Moreton; and Upton. These parishes came together as a single Benefice in 2006, which is part of the Archdeaconry of Dorchester in the Diocese of Oxford. The Benefice has a Rector (Jason St John Nicolle), a self-supporting priest (Rev Louise Butler) and an Administrator (Dawn Saunders). Until September 2020 the Benefice also had a House for Duty Priest (Rev John Clark). When Rev John Clark retired from his House for Duty post in 2020 he moved to East Hagbourne, and he is currently voluntarily continuing his work as a part-time member of the clergy team. The Benefice also has several Licensed Lay Readers and Preachers (Jenny Loder, Andrew Kaye & Martin Brassell) The Benefice has seven church buildings, a Benefice Centre (with office & meeting room) in Blewbury, and close involvement in two Church in England Primary Schools in Blewbury and East Hagbourne.

## 2. Our Priorities

There is so much to celebrate about our church life together. However, alongside our successes, we also face our challenges. Churches like ours in rural communities face many common challenges. They often have small and sometimes declining congregations, pressures around the upkeep of ancient buildings, differences of view about the extent to which traditional forms of worship should be modernised, less clergy resources than would have been available in the past, and differing levels of commitment from people willing to take on roles and responsibilities.

**Q.1 What do you think should be the main priorities for our Benefice?**

**Q.2 How might we want our Benefice to develop in the period up until 2030?**

### **3. Our People**

Churches in many places are experiencing a decline in active membership. This makes it increasingly challenging to find the human resources, in terms of paid clergy, staff and volunteers, to enable them to provide all the activities and support that have been expected in the past. The Churn Benefice review needs to consider and address this issue.

**Q.3 What strategies might we adopt to increase church membership?**

**Q.4 How might we encourage more participation in church roles?**

**Q.5 Should we work towards more joined-up collaboration across the Benefice rather than maintaining a full range of activities in every church?**

### **4. Our Finances**

Nearly all charitable organisations have been hit badly by the pandemic in different ways, and the churches are no exception to this. Dioceses, Parishes and Benefices are all facing rising costs and new pressures on their finances, however healthy they might have been in the past. We were not in a strong position before the pandemic came along, and we face even more uncertainty now. Traditional parish churches have always depended on church collections taken at weekly services as a major source of income, and in a year when most of those services have not happened this has caused income to drop severely in some of our parishes. Others have moved more effectively to on-line giving and should as a result remain in a positive budgetary position. Nevertheless, the Parish Share, which we are asked to contribute to the Diocese each year continues to increase, and we can anticipate a rising demand on our finances from that.

In this situation we either find ways to raise more funds or we cut our expenditure. In 2021 the Benefice needs to decide whether or not to seek to fill our House for Duty post, which has been vacated by Rev John Clark. Not filling that post could save us around £13.5k per year, but would leave us with a depleted staff team. There are other areas where we could attempt to cut costs, but spending less may mean doing less, so these will be challenging decisions to face. Another possibility is to cut our expenditure on the Churn Fund, which covers Benefice administration costs.

**Q.6 Do you think it is feasible to raise more funds, so that we can maintain and/or expand our activities as a Benefice, or is it more realistic to plan for a reducing income and plan to do less?**

**Q.7 Would you favour dropping the House for Duty Post or trying to maintain it? If we keep the post, what might be a good job description for the post?**

## **5. Future Patterns of Worship and Church Activities**

During much of the period of the pandemic we have held nearly all our services and other activities (mid-week groups, Lent courses, PCC meetings etc) on-line, and often as a combined Churn Benefice community. When the pandemic regulations have been relaxed sufficiently we could plan to return to a full schedule of face-to-face services in all of our six parishes. That model requires considerable resources – staff, lay volunteers and finances – so will be influenced by the position that we adopt in relation to some of the questions asked above. The alternative is to continue with some combined/on-line services

Alongside all of that, the demand for church weddings, baptisms, confirmations and funerals has dropped somewhat both nationally and locally. How should we respond to that?

**Q.8 What pattern of weekly services should we seek to resource across the Benefice?**

**Q.9 Should we aim to maintain some virtual activities using the internet? If so what might we do and how could that be blended with other actual activities?**

**Q.10 Should we be doing more to promote church weddings, baptisms, confirmations and funerals in our communities, or just accept that the demand will drop as society changes?**

### **A final thank you!**

This is very much an initial discussion document to stimulate our thinking, reflection and prayer. There may be other issues which you would like to raise - please do so! The aim is for us to work together as a Christian community to try and discern what God might be wanting to say to us at this time. The future will undoubtedly bring its changes, but God's great love for ourselves, our churches, and our communities remains constant. And so, we can face the future with hope and not a little excitement!

With every blessing

Father Jason  
Paul Batho  
Amanda le Conte  
Roger Murphy

19<sup>th</sup> March 2021