Annual Report, for the Benefice of Highnam, Tibberton with Rudford, and Taynton.

**“Vicar’s” Report 2018 : Rev Canon Helen Sammon.**



***The ‘LIFE’ Vision***

***“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”.***

John Chapter 10. Verse 10.

In 2017 the new Gloucester Diocesan vision was launched. It came from a period of prayer and discussion with church members, schools, and local communities, who were all asked to respond to questions about the role and future of the church. The vision is now firmly embedded in the life of the Diocese as a whole, and I have framed my report for 2018, as follows, around its main sections.

***L : Leadership. ‘Committed to transformation’***

There are many ways I believe that the leadership of our Benefice has been *‘committed to transformation’* : the transformation of our church life as we continually reflect, discuss and seek the way forward; the transformation of our relationships within and between our parishes; and the transformation of individuals as we develop in gifts and confidence.

Leadership around the Benefice is demonstrated in many different ways. While some of these are visible – in services and events – much of the invaluable leadership of the Benefice happens more ‘behind the scenes’. Firstly in this I would like to thank and affirm the work of our very loyal and hardworking churchwardens : Roger and Mark in Taynton; Elizabeth and Phil in Tibberton – and in the last year taking the responsibility also for Rudford, assisted by Ian; Pete and, our newest churchwarden, Bev in Highnam. As well as the daily responsibility which they hold, in terms of looking after the fabric of our beautiful buildings and ensuring everything is planned and arranged for the services, they are a central part of the leadership of the Benefice, working closely with me to provide much valued advice and support, and encouraging others in their roles within the life of the church. Being a churchwarden is an increasingly demanding role, and we cannot thank them enough.

The PCCs are another invaluable aspect of the leadership of our parishes, and we thank all the members and particularly our treasurers and secretaries. We ensure that our PCC agendas are not only about the important day to day issues of fabric and finance, but about the wider vision of our church life and our place within the community.

In the past year we have made noticeable steps in developing the leadership structures across the Benefice, so that we can have more joint discussion and vision. To this end, I am delighted that in 2018 we formally set up a ‘Benefice Council’, made up of the churchwardens, myself and our Benefice treasurer. The new Benefice financial account has been an important part of this shared leadership structure.

The Benefice Ministry Group has continued to meet monthly and, based in scripture and prayer, has provided a leadership forum across the Benefice for discussion of worship planning, outreach, teaching, pastoral care, and other aspects of the ‘bigger picture’ of our ministry and mission.

One of the LIFE vision priorities is : *‘ Developing lay and ordained leaders from the communities we serve’* . I believe that everyone, in their own way, has leadership skills and gifts to offer, and I hope that the encouragement and empowerment of one another can be central to our life as a church community. Examples of this over the past year have been :

* in many more people taking roles in our Sunday services, both in leading ‘up front’ as well as as sidespeople, coffee making etc;
* in the development of various teams who together lead Messy Church in Highnam, Little Church in Tibberton, church visiting in Highnam etc;
* and in the increasingly shared leadership across the Benefice for Benefice services, events and planning.

**I : *Imagination : Opening new paths to faith.***

We have engaged with specific Life vision priorities under this heading :

* *‘Investing in our engagement with baptism families...’ .* This is an area we have been giving particular emphasis to across the Benefice in the past year. It is a wonderful privilege and opportunity, that despite the low church attendance in society, so many young families still come to us to request baptism. They are very different events from a generation ago, now being seen as large family gatherings with often 100 or so people, and ‘venues’ for parties afterwards. For this reason it is usually felt more appropriate to hold baptism services separately from the main church service, so that we can give the family more attention and a service that they can fully engage with.

We have held regular ‘baptism preparation’ afternoons – a model that we have developed for our Benefice, and that has been noted and written about as an example for the wider Diocese. These are planned as an opportunity for families to meet and engage with one another as well as members of the church, so giving them a sense of being part of a community and not just coming for a ‘private’ service. The afternoons are planned to involve the older children of the families, with crafts and games, and the adults write their own prayers for their child.

Following baptism we encourage families to attend Little Church, regularly invite them to special services, and send a card and invitation to come to church on their first anniversary. Not all take up these invitations but they are gestures that help them know they are part of the church community. Our involvement in our local schools gives us opportunity to continue to meet with and nurture the faith of many of these children.

*Placing schools at the heart of our mission* : We are very privileged in our Benefice to have such active and open relationships with Highnam and Tibberton schools. Many of us could say, myself included, that in terms of hours per week we spend more time in school than in our church buildings – and that is a wonderful reflection of our engagement with the community; not just the children but staff, parents and grandparents.

Huge thanks go to those who represent the church on the Governing Body of our schools : Pete Sargent , Phil Perks and Sam Allen at Highnam, and Cath Perks at Tibberton.

In both schools we have continued leading assemblies (collective worship) every week during the term – thanks to dedicated teams and those who lead and organise. While we can mourn the days of large Sunday schools, we can claim that every week over 300 children across our two schools hear Bible stories and reflect on Christian life and values. As well as this we have been invited for class room teaching and welcomed the schools to church for their festival services. In September 2018 we held an ‘Education Sunday’ with children from Highnam school taking part in our Benefice service.

The well attended JAM club in Tibberton, and Messy Church in Highnam, have given opportunity to deepen the relationships with children and families, and for further exploration of aspects of the faith.

In early 2019 Highnam School had its 5 yearly faith based inspection (SIAMS); and it was of note that the relationship between the school and the local church was described as ‘outstanding’.

*‘Approaching the use, upkeep and future of our church buildings in new and creative ways’*

Rudford Church is a flagship example of how we have embraced this aspect of the LIFE vision. It would be very difficult to continue to run Rudford only as a parish church with Sunday services, because of the very small local community and its proximity to other churches. However Rudford Retreats which we started in 2017 have continued monthly throughout 2018, making Rudford now well known throughout the county and beyond as an interdenominational spiritual retreat centre. The monthly retreats are nearly always fully booked (20 people), and other groups use the church and school room regularly. As well as giving Rudford a new purpose and use, the retreat bookings provide a significant financial income. Recognising that Rudford now has a sense of being a ‘midweek’ church, in 2018 we replaced one of the Sunday services with the monthly ‘Coffee and Communion’ on Wednesdays. This has proved a popular service for people throughout the Benefice, drawing some who are not regular Sunday worshippers.

**F : Faith : *Living as adventurous followers of Jesus Christ.***

*‘Enabling people to discover new depths to prayer and spiritual growth, individually and together’.*

And *‘Nurturing confident disciples to live out their faith seven days a week’*

Developing our faith is, I hope, central to so much of our life together, and there have been some specific ways we have highlighted this over the past year.

* During Holy Week 2018, Bishop Bob, ran a series of talks for us, based on classical and modern paintings. These were well attended and much appreciated.
* Our Benefice services during 2018 took a theme of engaging with the wider community and society, with visiting preachers. We heard about the work of Psalms (sports outreach to young people), Street Pastors, the Foodbank, and the Diocesan Education department. In all these we learnt about inspiring expressions of faith.
* We welcomed Bishop Robert to Rudford in August, and Bishop Rachel to Tibberton in July. The latter was a memorable service with 130 or more people packed in church, with the Benefice choir and the involvement of ‘Little Church’. It was an uplifting and encouraging afternoon for us all, and the mitre that the children made for the Bishop still is in pride of place in her office!
* We have run Lent and Advent groups in both Highnam and Tibberton, again as opportunities for developing our faith through fellowship and informal discussion.
* In September we ran our second Alpha course, which we held in Highnam school. It was attended by 20 people, some of our regular congregation from all around the Benefice, and others from the wider community. As in the previous year it was very relaxed, giving the opportunity for people to explore, question and discuss the Christian faith. Following Alpha two home groups were set up which continue to meet fortnightly, and we welcomed Peter Biggar into the church family at his baptism.
* In the Highnam Sunday Praise service we have started a short section called ‘ My week’ in which we invite an individual from the congregation to say a little about their forthcoming week, and we pray for them. This is a recognition that in all that we do, even in very ordinary situations, we live out our faith amongst the people we meet.
* And it is of note – as I preached recently – that the frescoed Bible verses over the doors at Highnam church refer to going out into the world. The church doors are places to go out from, just as much as to come in through. The term a ‘church goer’ usually refers to those who attend church, but I hope we can interpret it in a different way : We gather in church on Sunday to worship God together and to encourage each other, and then, as ‘church-goers’ we go out into the world to live our lives as Christians.

**E : engagement.** *‘Living out Christ’s love and hope’*

Again, in so many aspects of our lives, we are engaged in the wider society – in our families, our work places, where we volunteer, and in our local community activities. One of the great strengths of being a village church over a large urban church, is that so many of us are involved in other aspects of the community life – it would be difficult not to be! It is in these places that people know us as those are a members of the church and who profess a Christian faith.

The following areas are the Life priorities of ‘engagement’ where we have put intentional effort.

*‘Connecting with new housing developments in innovative ways’.* The development of the 80 new houses at Lassington Reach in Highnam has brought significant growth and change to the community. From the first residents moving in in January 2018 the houses have been gradually completed and occupied. Following discussion and planning at PCC, we developed a comprehensive Welcome Pack, in conjunction with the Parish Council. These have been personally delivered to each house, and followed up with another personal visit, card and home made cake (see Helen Babbage’s report for Highnam). In July we invited all residents to the outdoor service at Lassington Tower, but despite a lively procession, wonderful sunshine and a brass band, no one from there came... a shame, but not a reason to think our welcoming has not born fruit. In December we held carol singing on the estate and several families joined in and stayed for mulled wine and a chat. We are now meeting the new families at the local school, and receiving requests for baptisms and weddings. All those we meet comment on how welcome they have been made in the village, and of note, by the members of the church.

*‘Using sport, music and art to build relationships and share the Christian faith’.* We have had the opportunity during the year to work in partnership with ‘Psalms’ –the Christian sports youth workers. In Highnam school we put up a team of volunteers to run a sports day ‘Pulse Games’, where through sporting activities the children learnt about applying Christian values to their lives. Psalms have continued to work in Highnam school in weekly ‘Active RE’ sessions. Some of the community attended and helped at a summer Christian sports camp in Newent. These have been small, but valuable, steps in our engagement with children in this new way.

*‘Investing in people and programmes, which excite young people to explore and grow in faith’.*

While not strictly part of a 2018 report, the thinking and discussion behind a very significant new project began during the year, and is worthy of mention here. This is a Benefice wide project to employ a part time dedicated Christian ‘Children and Families worker’, who will work with us in all our engagement with schools and young people of our communities – to bring us new encouragement, inspiration and energy. There is so much that we are doing, and yet so much more potential. As this annual report is published we are awaiting the outcome of two significant funding applications, and if successful will seek to employ someone later this year.

Other ways of note in which we ‘engage’ with our local community have been :

* The Taynton Coffee Mornings, which started in autumn of 2017 and have continued monthly, with over 20 people usually attending. We have held these in different homes, at the invitation of village people, and in the 18 months of running them have not visited the same home twice. They are firmly established as a part of Taynton village life and have greatly added to the sense of local community.
* In Highnam we continue to prioritise the ‘tourism’ side of the church, with investment in our advertising, a growing team of stewards to welcome and show people around, and linking the church opening to local festivals and events. (see report).
* In the summer of 2018 we held our second ‘Service in the Churchyard’ at Highnam, and first in Tibberton, inviting those who come to the churchyards to visit graves of loved ones. Through these we have met and welcomed those who would not otherwise come to a church service, and yet greatly appreciate the opportunity that these outdoor services give for prayer, welcome and personal contact with the church. Helen had the opportunity to publish an article about this service in the Church Times (March 2019), so that other parishes can learn from it.

In all the ways described above and many more, **thank you** to everyone for enabling our Benefice, to live out Jesus’ desire :



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