

Well it's been quite a year! Both in the personal lives of some of you here, and in the life of our benefice, our faithful God has clearly been at work. Having already thanked our churchwardens, I'm conscious of how many others deserve special thanks too. Among them our treasurers who do a task that I could never do – and this year we say goodbye to Richard Gregory who is also moving away – with Tricia of course. Because our buildings are so important thanks go to the fabric officers some of whom are churchwardens too for the tireless work they put in. And this time I'd like to thank all our church cleaners – a behind the scenes role that can be taken for granted – forgive us for doing that ...if you don't know who cleans your church, find out and show your appreciation, better still if you could join them and make the task lighter.

Especially I must thank all those who have been involved in fund raising in one way or another – it's so healthy to have churches that take all their financial responsibilities seriously and are faithful in this ministry – again be ready to help out where you can. This coming year – this Saturday in fact- Broome and Ditchingham have come together to hold a joint event – the wardens will tell you where to get tickets for it. And what about all those who have helped lead services of worship – I never cease to feel grateful for our dedicated staff team who help me to provide services in 6 churches Sunday after Sunday – sometime more. I'd like to make a special mention of Peter and Anthony (officially retired whatever that is meant to mean!) without whom the rest of us would struggle to sustain our present services pattern.

What a busy life we have led here! Too many things to mention them all so let me touch on the highlights. The year began with giving Rosalind a send-off into her new career, and a welcome to Michelle as PA whose skills and imagination have been a gift to us. And we now have our own website, thanks to her husband Chris.

Our holiday club was apparently the best one yet, so I was told. Nearly 90 children and around 40 helpers had great fun and heard afresh the good news of the Gospel. One child came to faith, was baptised in the autumn and will be confirmed this year.

Then came Reg's ordination and Phil's licensing as a Reader. The ministry of both has gone from strength to strength, and we look forward to Reg being ordained priest this October and being able to take a full part in the priestly ministry of the Church of England – staying amongst us I hasten to add! Phil brings a new dimension to reader ministry with his musical gifts.

Then came Growing Leaders – the course for those whose ministry has been emerging and continues to do so. What we had said last year about the gifts of some people lying dormant we discover was right. Now most of the group are moving in another direction on their faith journey, and all have some sense of where God may be leading them next in their discipleship. So do carry on praying for them. This year we plan to run two courses one for those who need keen listening skills for pastoral work, and one for those who would like to get to grips with the main facts about our faith and want to grow toward God. Both courses will be open to everyone. Presently we have confirmation courses running, with 3 adults and 8 young people being confirmed at the Cathedral on June 7th. **Be encouraged by this!**

Forming a backcloth to the shaping of ministry here, has been the Committed to Growth initiative, which has produced some fruitful discussions and direction for the way forward in each of our villages, as well as earmarking where we could go in developing our corporate mission in the benefice.

However we understand mission now, it's God's own agenda for His churches –

He is a missionary God.

Our benefice office project has been very interesting – not least because most of our individual donations toward the cost have come from people outside of our usual worshipping congregations. Suggesting that they have caught the vision of what this new office is really all about. For the good of our wider communities not only the church. When it's built and ready to open we will have a celebration Saturday -Open House at the Rectory where you can also search the garden for all of those plants you gave last year, and see how they are thriving.

Autumn brought a welcome opportunity for a few people to visit Lindisfarne and reflect on all that God has been doing in their lives. This year 20 people will take a 5 day break up there, and surely return refreshed and inspired to serve the Lord.

Amid all the good things that have happened was of course our sadness at losing dear Kit Flatt who had been an inspiration to so many of us. I'm sure she would be proud of how Alburgh has responded to the challenge of being without her ministry among them.

Christmas came with all its busyness and with a sense of that unexplainable peace as we once again celebrated Emmanuel God with us. Numbers were up in most of our services and Christingles etc. and we were encouraged by seeing new faces and people expressing their thanks and joy.

Our ministry among those who are bereaved, want to get married or have children baptised continues to flourish. We hope to develop a three-stage marriage course and visiting scheme throughout the benefice, which reminds me to thank all of you who have been involved in any of the things I have mentioned here.

May you continue to appreciate the ministry of Chris Whipps and Deb Cousins as their training goes on; also for Sue Cramp and Gill Hipwell as their ministries at Diocese level continue to flourish and develop.

Inevitably I will have missed out so much and so many more.

So let's thank God for them right now together. Let us bless the Lord **thanks be to God.**

So looking to the year ahead – where is God taking us?

Well we have such a wealth and breadth of activity throughout the benefice, that I wonder are we allowing ourselves to be still and listen to the Lord enough? Much more activity is being recorded in our Growth Plans as each parish decides what they will focus on this year as a missionary church, and God's people in its village. So, if we are to become even busier, we must allow God to sustain us, mustn't we? How will we do that?

We're back now to the bible verses that were read to us earlier.

“As you therefore have received Christ ...continue to live your lives in

Him, rooted and built up in Him.” That means we cannot afford to be rooted in anything else.

The future of our churches requires us to explore and experiment – that isn't new to you, you've been engaged in that for a while now. We need to keep on trying out other ways of connecting with the world outside our congregations – with those who cannot see any relevance in faith and church. **We cannot see what our future will look like - I John 3 says “We do not see what we shall become”.**

This is exciting for some. But for others it's disorientating and daunting. We surely need godly wisdom to know how to live our future life faithfully for God. **We need to know what to take and what to leave behind.** I believe it isn't good enough to say let go of all the old stuff and bring in all the new and modern. If we do that we'll just be copying our modern culture instead of challenging it. The world we are trying to reach with the gospel has lost its depth. If we lose it too we will end up offering a restless rootless church to a restless rootless world.

So there's our answer. **We need to nurture DEPTH. It involves searching and hard work and takes time. We must put our roots of faith down even deeper - living and praying more deeply into God Himself.** Because our world needs deep Christians.

So how are we to grow churches with real depth? Be deep people in a rooted Christian church.

Really the only way is to develop our corporate prayer life - worship in styles that also meet God in the pain as well as in the elation and high emotion. This is the only way that our efforts can be sustained. So we continue to develop what we already have... daily prayer times around the benefice, prayerful parts in all our services, opportunities for prayer ministry and healing, going on retreats or quiet days, spending time ALONE with our God, finding a prayer triplet to be part of, joining a home group that shares together prayerfully. We've had a vision statement in N4P for months now. Here is a shorter one **We pray We serve We tell** ...notice which is first. God is calling us first and foremost to go deeper into Him. Deeper into our Creator and Sustainer. “Jesus take me as I am I can come no other way. Take me deeper in you”.