

The benefice of Eynsford with Farningham and Lullingstone

Minutes of the Benefice AGM 2016 - *to be agreed at the 2017 AGM*

1. Report of the activities of the benefice Council 2015-16

Membership

Chair: Rev Gary Owen (Rector)

Other clergy: Rev Dorothy McGarvey (curate)

Eynsford: Paul Boyle, Mike Hill, Peter Sansom, Frank Rogers
(replaced by Lynda Gwyther from September 2015)

Farningham: Liz Meachin, Helen Goldsworthy, Gerald Roome,
Beryl Saunders

Lullingstone: Tony Chapman, George Comer (vice chair), Peter Hill, Jane Wills

Licensed ministers: Jan Thompson and Peter Davis
(non-voting)

Secretary: Tina Watson

Treasurer: Brian Mason

Meetings

The Council met four times in the year; in March, June, September and December.

In March the main items were the launching of new congregations, arrangements for Gary's sabbatical and the setting up of a new benefice website.

In June, the Council received reports from two ministers in training: Tina on her mission project and Ruth on her placement in Hackney. The building project in St Martin's and the Shand Hall in Farningham were reviewed. Support was given to running a toilet twinning project.

September made final arrangements for the launching of new congregations and the Autumn rota agreed. It was agreed to hold a Benefice retreat led by Fitfish. Thanks was offered to Oscar Bailey, stepping down as a lay reader. The Council referred the issue of accepting the potential ministry of women bishops to individual PCCs for their comments.

In December the Council considered the issue of the Diocesan offering, and urged each parish to try to increase their offering by 2.5% as requested by the Diocese. The Council agreed a budget for 2016, cutting benefice expenses to enable the 2.5% increase in Diocesan Offering without an extra burden on the parishes. A report on youth and children's work was endorsed; with support for a holiday club and youth group. The new pattern of services received an initial review with a further review planned for March. Reports were received about the Darenth Valley Partnership and Churches Together in Sevenoaks.

2. Treasurers report

Mr Brian Mason (treasurer) reported that the accounts of the Benefice had been distributed to members of the Council and everyone was welcome to inspect them. The benefice has no income other than monthly payments made by PCCs and all monies were distributed on their behalf.

He reported that due to a small excess of receipts over payments a surplus was available for use in 2016 to increase the Diocesan offer by 2.5% without any increase in payments from the parishes.

Gary thanked Brian for his efficient work as treasurer.

3. Rector's report

On Friday Helen and I visited the British Museum. Faced with a vast array of rooms and displays we chose a few items of interest to focus on.

We took a guided tour of the "money" room with displays about coinage from ancient times to the current day. Our guide reminded us that money was an excellent way of conveying messages, including religious ones. An American on the tour commented how all American banknotes carry the message: "In God we trust".

This would seem an excellent motto for us as a Benefice at the present time: "In God we trust".

The first half of 2015 saw the completion of the reordering in St Martin's; a significant project completed at significant cost, but providing a wonderful space for us as a church and community. Significantly it has created much good will in the village and people have taken note that there is something happening down at the church. New people have come into the church building and we trust will begin to worship with us. Our aim was always that people would see that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God (Nehemiah 6.16).

The second half of the year was significant in that we launched our new congregations. Our aim was to provide a breadth of worship across the benefice; at different times and in different styles, whilst also releasing each church (or congregation) to build a church for its village. Our aim was unashamedly to grow; believing that spiritual and numerical growth is the normal course of events for churches, as evidenced by Jesus parables of seeds and plants.

As with any change, some have found the new congregations easier to embrace than others. This has been for many reasons. We live in the midst of a rapidly changing society, and doing the same things as before and hoping that we will remain relevant and of interest is folly. The unchanging Gospel of Jesus must be expressed afresh in each generation. The challenge is to find our security not in old, familiar ways of doing things, but in the unchanging God in whom we trust.

Nonetheless, our new congregational pattern has already yielded a growing sense of optimism in Farningham, with new members joining the church (and choir). Our initial aim of a weekly congregation of 30 has already been reached and our sights lifted to 40! The Sunday@7.00 church plant in Eynsford has been slowly building momentum with attendance for the last few weeks hitting the mid teens. For the last few weeks we have been working on an evangelistic strategy based on praying for opportunities to talk to

people about Jesus and to pray with people for God's miraculous intervention in their lives. Again, this is an exercise in trust in God; that he wants to work in peoples' lives and that he might use us to do so!

The new congregational pattern and people moving into new areas of ministry has given opportunity for new thinking in other areas. Our work with young people is one such area. Many Anglican churches now have no under 18s regularly attending. We have been blessed by God with many young people and this places a burden of responsibility on those of us who are more mature in the faith to nurture these young ones. Our Sunday school three Sundays per month in Eynsford, two family services per month in Farningham and the hope of children's activities on a monthly basis in Lullingstone has been further supplemented by a new youth group meeting on a Wednesday teatime in the rectory and a holiday club planned for February half term. Please pray for, and take an interest in these new ventures.

Our efforts to reach out to adults has been more mixed. The Alpha course last Spring was small, but did result in one person making a commitment to Christ and joining the church. She will be Confirmed in April. This Spring's Alpha only attracted two people and so could not go ahead. This is a matter of concern. If we fail to provide a Christian basics course in which people can find out about the Faith and decide whether they want to commit to Jesus we are likely to struggle to grow.

However, other activities, notably marriage preparation, Farningham choir, the clergy's involvement with school, and chess club (where good contacts have been made and conversations had) have seen people brought into the life of the churches. We need to find ways of helping people who have joined us discover the full richness of a life lived with Christ and to live as disciples day by day.

I would like to mention another area of significant spiritual growth this year in the life of our Benefice. The Benefice Council and PCCs decided to increase their Diocesan offering for 2016 by 2.5%. Normally we agonise over the Offering and a reluctant offer is made. This year we decided, positively and joyfully, to make our contribution. God loves a cheerful giver. I expect this cheerful generosity to release a new blessing on the life of our churches; as we trust in God for his provision.

The launch of our new congregations has caused some people to wonder what the future of our Benefice holds. Will the whole thing just unravel? We have always said that the Benefice exists to serve the mission of the parishes, not the other way round. When the parishes are forced into a mould to suit the Benefice then growth is stifled. However, when the Benefice supports the life of the parishes then growth is possible. There are still many things done better together than apart; such as youth work, marriage prep, Alpha, Confirmation prep and home groups. We've recently held a benefice training evening for those who lead aspects of Sunday worship. We can enjoy being together on high days and holidays; and it's on these occasions when we can muster a full benefice choir and people from all three churches that we can pull out the stops for something special. As we've launched new congregations focus has necessarily been on building up each congregation. This must continue. However, as each congregation grows in its own identity I trust that each congregation will take a prayerful interest in the others, supporting and encouraging each other.

Each parish, and the Benefice as a whole, can only fulfil its God given mission, through the time and commitment of its members. We are the church! We are incredibly grateful to all those who give of themselves to support our mission. There are too many to mention by name in this report, but we know who they are: ministry team, wardens, PCCs and their officers, and all who give of their times and talent to

help our churches fulfil their ministry. It is, however, important to mention here that in the course of the year Dorothy has been ordained priest, and has moved from part time to full time SSM. Tina has moved a year further through her Licensed Lay Minister training. Jan is now licensed to conduct funerals. People offering themselves for ministry, lay or ordained, increases our capacity to build lively and God honouring churches.

I see the next two years in the life of our benefice as significant ones. We have completed the reordering at St Martin's, the Shand hall in Farningham will soon be complete. We have restructured our services for growth. I trust that in the next two years we will begin to reap the rewards. What will enable us to take advantage of the opportunities created comes down to three things: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love. No amount of putting structures in place or indeed doing the right things, will bear any lasting fruit, unless we put on these three great Christian virtues. But if we do grasp them with both hands and show them forth in our lives, then the Gospel is unstoppable and God's kingdom will come in this place.

Another room Helen and I visited in the British Museum was the Roman Britain room. We found the mosaic from Lullingstone Roman Villa - the chi-rho symbol from the house church that met in the villa 1,700 years ago. I find the fact that Christians have been worshipping in this Benefice for nearly two millenia most encouraging. This is God's valley - made by him, loved by him. It's a valley for which Jesus died and a valley that will be renewed at his return. God has been very faithful to this valley over many years. I believe he will be in the years to come. We cannot be complacent. We have a sacred trust to continue the worship, prayer and mission to this valley in our own generation. But it doesn't *all* rest on us. God is God, and we are simply here to serve him.

It is in God we trust.

Questions/comments from the floor:

- Joanna thanked the Rector and his wife for their hard work, and God for bringing them to the parishes
- Norman asked if Gary would like to comment on Rupert's departure as Eynsford/Farningham director of music.

Gary said that he was sad about Rupert's departure and that he knew others were too. He said that people come and go, even vicars, but that no one was indispensable. God would continue to build his church.

- Audrey asked whether attendance at 9.30am in Eynsford had increased or decreased in the last year?

Gary said that his gut feeling was that it was static. 5 new family units were now attending church, but not weekly. It would be good to encourage them to come more often.

Paul reported that attendance at 9.30am and 7.00pm combined was slightly up during the course of the year.

Michelle reported that Sunday school had a few new members.

4. Vice-chairs thanks

Mr George Comer thanked those who had contributed to the smooth running of the Benefice Council over the last year; especially the treasurer (Mr Brian Mason), the secretary (Ms Tina Watson), the curate (Rev Dorothy McGarvey) and the Rector (Rev Gary Owen).