

The Benefice of Eynsford with Farningham and Lullingstone

Benefice AGM 2019

Rector's report for 2018

2018 has proved to be another year of steady progress in the benefice. Most significantly Dorothy completed her curacy and the Bishop invited her to stay in the benefice as associate rector. This has enabled us to begin to make plans based on two clergy being resident in the benefice – a great opportunity for three small churches like ours.

Through the Autumn the benefice council and ministry team took time out discern what God might be calling us to in the next 1-3 years, to set priorities and to assign roles to clergy and licenced ministers to take this work forward. The ministry team spent a week away in Abersoch, North Wales planning and preparing. More about the future in a minute.

During 2018 we maintained our now well-established pattern of services. Sunday mornings remain our main time of being together and one of the main 'doors' through which people enter the church family. Its been a delight to see new people starting to come along regularly, notably in Eynsford and some in Lullingstone. The congregation at St Martin's has felt noticeably larger over the last few months with new and younger faces. It now feels like all-ages are well represented. Many thanks to all who contribute to our Sunday mornings; from the ministry team who lead and preach, to our organists, choirs and other musicians, to wardens who oversee the services and all who take part and offer a welcome and hospitality.

During the course of the year we conducted 12 baptisms (5 in Eynsford, 4 in Farningham and 3 in Lullingstone), 14 weddings (4 in Eynsford, 8 in Farningham and 2 in Lullingstone) and 18 funerals (10 in Eynsford, 4 in Farningham and 4 in Lullingstone); as well as burying 18 cremated remains. Occasional offices (or life events as they are now known) represent a significant investment of our time and energy, as well as being a good source of income!

Our homegroups have continued to provide a focus for our mid-week life together and it was a joy to celebrate their life at the last service of 2018. Over 40 people attend regularly with others coming during Lent or when they are able. Homegroups provide a space for people to learn about the Christian faith and apply it to their lives, pray together and enjoy fellowship and mutual support. The groups have now completed the Church of England Pilgrim course, as well as several other shorter courses. We thank Jan and Hazel for overseeing this vital part of our church life for the last 5 years and the group leaders for their commitment week by week. As the homegroups head into a new phase Tina will be taking over oversight and we wish her well in this new ministry.

For children aged 4 to 12, we provide Sunday school on a weekly basis in Eynsford and on a 4th Sunday in Lullingstone. There is a children's activity table at the back of Farningham during communion services. REVIVE youth group welcomes children from the final year of primary school to age 16. Lullingstone Sunday school saw its best attendance of the year in December with 8 children making Christingles. REVIVE doubled in size in September with the addition of 8 year 6s. Our weekly attendance is now around 16 and we often split into younger and older sections when tackling religious content.

Our church based work with children runs alongside our work with schools. We have maintained a weekly Christian assembly in Anthony Roper School, and I continue to serve as vice-chair of governors and run the chess club. We also support Trinity School, the Christian free school in Sevenoaks, which 3 of our church children attend – and hopefully at least one more will be joining in September! I have served as Chair of the Sevenoaks Churches Education Trust from April 2018 and will hand over this responsibility in April 2019.

There has been an active program of social events running across the 3 churches during the course of the year; focused around the Friends in Lullingstone, the fairs in Farningham and the social committee in Eynsford. A fantastic addition to this programme has been the weekly café set up in the Shand Hall, serving refreshments and providing a place to socialise; often with the downstairs room full to capacity. Eynsford are planning a monthly coffee and craft session on the last Wednesday of the month, a stepping up of the termly knit and natter. Again, the hope is to provide a place of community and share something of church with the wider community. St Martin's is used on a weekly basis for chess club and monthly basis for Eynsfara. St Peter & St Paul's is used by the Follies. Both churches have hosted concerts and been used for various village events and pilgrims from St Martin in the Field stopped by St Martin's for refreshments en-route to Canterbury.

There have been numerous highlights to the year.

One for me was Thy Kingdom Come – our week of prayer between Ascension and Pentecost. We took the lead in producing a deanery prayer station which was displayed in the Cathedral and ran various prayer events in the benefice.

Another was the visit to Camphin with the Eynsford twinning group, during which Helen, I and the girls stayed with the Catholic priest and during which we co-led a joint Anglican/Catholic, English/French service in the church in Camphin. It was a real encouragement to have non-church Eynsfordians taking a full part in this service.

A third highlight has been praying with those members of the ministry team who have been able to make ministry team prayers on a Monday morning. We've had a growing sense that for all our efforts, nothing is going to happen spiritually unless God moves by his Spirit to bring people to faith and incorporate them into the church family. We've been praying hard for God to act, and just recently we've witnessed several new people coming into church and one amazing conversion; not by our efforts but by God's intervention!

A major achievement this year has been paying off the last of the building loan for St Martin's. We offer our thanks to all who have given so generously and to the events team

for organising the events which have helped make repayment possible. St Martin's can now turn its attention to work which has not been possible previously: particularly tree work in the churchyard and upgrading the Olive Seal Hall.

Sadly, something not achieved has been the transfer of the Shand Hall to Farningham PCC. The development of the old Metalpack site next to St Peter & St Paul has been plagued with difficulties and a fire this year has delayed handover further. Hopefully we will gain ownership in the Spring but Summer might be more realistic. The administrators are happy for the church to use the building in the meantime, but only for church events and not for any other village groups.

Another frustration this year has been the amount of time we have had to spend on GDPR compliance and safeguarding. The burden of regulatory compliance seems to increase every year and saps energy and time which could be spent on mission. It is so important that our churches are safe places for children and vulnerable adults and I'm grateful to Peter Davis for being our safeguarding lead and to all who have attended various courses. Having got most of our compliance in place I hope we can move forward positively.

So, what of the future?

The benefice council and ministry team have agreed the following priorities for the next one to three years:

1. To build up Sunday services as the focus of our common life together – building up numbers as well as content
2. To grow church members as disciples through homegroups and age appropriate groups for 0-18s.
3. To grow more leaders.
4. To make the most of occasional offices (life events) as a means of connecting people with Jesus.
5. To do better at evangelism, so more people come to faith.

We aim to do this whilst maintaining all that makes for a healthy Anglican Church; including good pastoral care and schools work.

We also aim to set up a benefice office and to review midweek services to better serve pastoral care needs and evangelism.

We've already begun to make progress with some of these aims.

We've reconstituted the benefice pastoral team, under Dorothy's leadership, and the team now meets regularly for training and sharing.

The benefice has set up a sub-committee to look at options for creating an office, although this is proving a rather difficult task to negotiate! The sub-committee will report back to the benefice council in February.

We think we do a pretty good job with marriages – focused around a four-week marriage preparation course which I wrote based on the marriage service itself. Dorothy is now looking at how we can do better with baptisms and will bring her thinking to the next benefice council meeting.

High up our list of priorities must then be to start a ministry with pre-school children. The best baptism prep will prove ineffective if we do not have something to engage pre-school children and their families with the Christian faith. It's no good baptising children and then expecting them to sit in our Sunday services until they are old enough to join Sunday school. The lack of younger children in St Martin's Sunday school is surely a result of lack of investment in provision for pre-school children.

In Autumn 2018 we started another Alpha course, which will finish at the end of January. At least one group member will be baptised on Sunday 20th January and confirmed on Sunday 27th. The challenge is to then build momentum from this course, possibly running another after Easter. But we need to continue to find ways connect people into the life of the church, so that they might want to come on Alpha, explore the Christian faith for themselves and hopefully become Christians. The onus is on us all to make the Christian faith as attractive as possible and to invite friends to get involved. The more points of contact we can make between church and villagers the better, as long as we are then prepared to summon our courage and take the opportunities this presents.

Addressing the issue of raising up more leaders is less urgent but just as important. We are blessed with having two clergy and four licensed ministers, but four are over 65 and I am the only one under 50. We need to find ways for younger people to explore vocations to licenced ministry, but also to explore callings to lay roles as well, to ensure the viability of our benefice in the long term.

I wanted to end by offering my thanks to you all for your partnership in the gospel; from ministry team to wardens, secretaries, treasurers, PCC members, Tina in the office, Barrie our director of music, those who run our various groups and activities; and all who simply contribute by being themselves and sharing in our common life together. I believe our churches are in good heart and as we continue to follow Jesus the future is surely bright.