

An Overview of the Meon Valley Parishes (MVP)

Challenges

In order to understand the challenges that we face to sustain and grow the life of our church communities, and to understand the pattern of ministry that is now being explored in the Meon Valley Parishes (including: why the wider church will only fund one full-time priest, whereas in 2015 there were five in our area) we need to acknowledge the current state of the Church of England. See the **Post Script** at the end of this piece.

God's Grace

But.....with God, all things are possible! Times of challenge should be times of greater blessing, because they make us turn to God afresh, in prayer, service, love and humility – seeking the grace of Christ, in and through the sustaining love of our heavenly Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As many poorer Christians across the world show us, there is joy and renewal to be found in the face of adversity.

Bringing Together three Benefices

Previously the parishes have been collated into three benefices:

- 1) Swanmore

- 2) Droxford, Corhampton with Meonstoke and Exton
(The "Meon Bridge" or "Bridge" Benefice)

3) Hambledon, Soberton and Newtown (the latter two having been linked together for many years)

Each of the three benefices used to have priests operating in a "solo" role.

A New Vision

The new vision for the Meon Valley provides for a generous measure of ministry resource, based in "self-supporting ministry" (see below) and seeking to encourage:

- collaborative working, especially to avoid ministering in isolation.
- parish distinctiveness. *Very important – honouring identity and the "folk memory" that is part of every parish and church community.*
- building on already developed relationships;
- encouraging the rich vein of talent and dedication found among our congregations.

Bishop Jonathan presented a particular vision of the development of a community of Clergy, Anna Chaplains / Friends (ministering to the elderly), and Lay Worship Leaders - all working together in a co-ordinated way, and responding to the Bishop's call for parishes to develop their own leaders, rather than rely on the Vicar to do everything.

First Steps

I have been appointed "Interim Priest-in-Charge" of the Meon Valley Parishes, to explore how best to provide ministry in a changing environment across eight church buildings. I am delighted to be working with Revd Liz Quinn, who is also licensed to the MVP, but with a particular focus in Hambledon, Soberton and Newtown.

Existing Resources

We are so fortunate to have a significant number of local Clergy, Readers and others who willingly populate our service rotas and provide cover for so many Sunday and weekday services, plus baptisms, weddings, funerals, and other ministries.

It is also wonderful to have Licensed Lay Workers, Lay Worship Leaders, churchwardens, secretaries, administrators, treasurers, vergers, musicians, choir members, sides-people, cleaners, churchyard maintenance, group leaders, caterers, social event organisers and helpers, flower arrangers.....an endless list!

Other People of Goodwill

Many others in our village communities, offer a huge range of skills to the church, with enthusiasm, dedication and goodwill. (Over the years I have been privileged to work with many members of the community of different faiths or none).

The overall aim is for all these skills to be used more widely: sharing experience and good practice in a variety of ways: faith development, worship, safeguarding, buildings, administration, etc?

Our Communities, Our Church Buildings

Fundamental to the flourishing of our churches are:

- an active and vibrant relationship with the local and wider community.
- Ensuring our church buildings are used as much as possible, and are lively community hubs, and places of holiness, depth and mystery.

New Money: application for SMMI funding

We are putting in a bid to the national church to provide significant funding for five years (including paid posts) for administrative and I.T. support, plus support for work with children, young people and families. These funds are part of the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment (SMMI) initiative, to create sustainable projects, that will have an impact in the long term.

Specialized Clergy

It is worth noting that, increasingly, many clergy receive a more specific training: in youth work, family work, community work, etc. Some are called to be "Pioneer Ministers":

"Pioneers are people called by God, who are the first to see and creatively respond to the Holy Spirit's initiatives with those outside the church;

gathering others around them as they seek to establish new contextual Christian community."

It might be that we can benefit from "specialist" ministry appointments, as well as appointing those who minister in the general style of a "parish minister".

Different Types of Clergy

These days, the majority of the clergy in the Church of England are part-time, and fall into three main categories (listed below). An increasing trend is therefore to appoint just one full-time stipendiary priest to oversee such variety of ministry:

Self-Supporting Ministers

SSMs are ordained, licensed clergy. Clergy are given a licence by a bishop, which gives them authority to minister in a particular context for an unlimited period (under "Common Tenure") or for a particular period of time (perhaps 3 or 5 years). SSMs offer their ministry on an unpaid basis, and they make a vital and important contribution to parish ministry. In England around 30% of licensed clergy are SSM.

Retired Clergy

Retired clergy are given "Permission to Officiate" (PTO) rather than a licence. To have PTO essentially means that you are ministering with the support of both the Diocesan Bishop, and the clergy responsible for the parish(es) where you serve. Retired clergy offer a very significant resource for our parishes, through their willingness to take services and offer pastoral care. About one third of serving clergy are retired.

House for Duty

House for Duty clergy are S.S.M.s (see above) who, in exchange for being given a vicarage or another clergy house to live in (and usually working expenses) offer ministry - typically covering Sunday services and perhaps

two to three days a week (or more if they wish). This role is suited to clergy who have a partner with a paid job; or who have a part-time secular job, or who have taken early retirement from another job, or who are easing into retirement from a stipendiary (paid) clergy post. It also appeals, because a House-for-Duty priest can concentrate on worship, visiting and community work, but doesn't have to be concerned with overseeing the more legal/formal duties of a parish priest (e.g churchyard regulations, managing PCC's, overseeing safeguarding, etc). These responsibilities are covered by the stipendiary (paid) clergy. A House for Duty priest gives parishes the benefit of a resident priest, albeit part-time, who lives and serves in a particular place, and gets to know the people there.

Welcoming New Ministers

A start date for any newly appointed minister is difficult to predict, because each appointment will be dependent on a number of factors, including

- diocesan timescales;
- preparing the house if they are going to occupy one of the vicarages (e.g tenants vacating, repairs and improvements being made to the house and garden – usually the responsibility of the diocese);
- whether the appointment is to be by advertisement or nomination – that is, approved and recommended by the bishop;
- the date when the appointed person is available to begin.

Teamwork

A person appointed to the Benefice would have a particular location and/or focus for their ministry, but would also offer their gifts and talents across the Meon Valley Parishes as a whole.

Post Script

As mentioned at the beginning, in order to understand the huge challenges that we face to sustain and grow the life of our church communities, and to understand the pattern of ministry that is now being explored in the Meon Valley Parishes (including: why the wider church will only fund one full-time priest, whereas in 2015 there were five) we need to acknowledge the current state of the Church of England.

All statistics are taken from Census data and the British government's "Social Attitudes Survey"

- 1) The number of people who identify as "Christian" in the UK has nearly halved in just 25 years.
- 2) The biggest decline among all Christian denominations is for those who identify as "Church of England": from 66% of the population to just 12%.
- 3) In 2019, for the first time in history, a majority of the UK population identified as "non-religious" (52%) - an increase of 70% since 1979.
- 4) Although 12% identify as Anglican, only 800,000 actually attend a Church of England church "frequently" (which doesn't mean weekly, but once a month or more frequently).
- 5) Anglicans (800,000) are out-numbered by Muslims (over twice as many attend worship – 1.9 million) and Roman Catholics (1.2 million).
- 6) The average age of Anglicans in the UK is 65. This of course means that a significant number are a good deal older.

- 7) Less than 1% of 18 to 24 year-olds identify as Anglican. 88% of that age group say that they do not even believe in God.
- 8) 91% of the UK population say that the Church of England has either "very little relevance" or "no relevance" in their day to day lives.
- 9) Over 400 Anglican churches have closed in the last 10 years. This was an eight-fold increase from the 50 that closed in the previous 10 years. The trend suggests a rapid acceleration, with another 400 churches closing in the next five years.
- 10) If current decline continues, there will be no Anglicans worshipping in the UK in 20 years time.

Changes in Church "Culture"

- 1) The Christian faith is rooted in history – and is centred on certain people and certain events. Fewer people know that story any more. For example, many children know nothing of Jesus, or the main events in the Bible; and even less about the life of the Anglican Church.
- 2) Sundays have changed beyond recognition. Fifty years ago, going to church was one of a small number of options. These days, many more things are possible on a Sunday morning (shopping, sport, car boot sales; or simply a time to rest and be with loved ones).
- 3) Many more people are against "established" religion (including any form of organised worship). In part, this is due to a rejection of "authority" which is seen in many other walks of life – notably in the decline of trust in civic and political institutions.

- 4) Although the increased interest in “spirituality” may sound positive for Christianity, it is often self-centred, rather than God-centred: what “works for me”, rather than what might be rooted in universal truth.
- 5) Holding a “belief” or having “a faith” are not things that command respect. In fact, they are often ridiculed. In large part this is because there is a significant minority of people that believe in conspiracy theories and falsehoods that are propagated online.
- 6) There has been an increase in powerful and thoughtful attacks on religious belief. The most famous might be *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins; but more challenging to Christian faith (in my opinion!) is *God is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens – and even more challenging still (because of its use of psychology and neuroscience) *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris.
- 7) There is intense debate within the church about whether to cling to traditional beliefs and practices or whether to embrace a more contemporary approach (for example, the intense debates about sexuality and marriage). In the 1990s, churches in Portsmouth tracked down 600 people who had stopped going to church. 42% said that they had left because the church had modernised too much. The exact same percentage said they had left because the church was unwilling to modernise.
- 8) It was accepted for hundreds of years that religious faith improved behaviour. Today we are far more aware that
 - a) goodness and moral courage are found in people of all faiths and none.
 - b) religious beliefs can make some people even more cruel and intolerant (this is set out powerfully in Hitchens’ book, mentioned above).