

## The Vicar's Annual Report 2023

At the beginning of 2023, our Diocesan Bishop launched “Travelling Well Together”. This is not a new strategy or tagline for the Diocese of Chelmsford, but a set of seven values designed to be principles which can inform our shared life as churches across Essex and East London. One of the values is an “Awareness of Grace”, in other words “*God always provides the resources required for the mission of the church to continue. An awareness of grace engenders a spirit of thankfulness and enables us to notice what we have, rather than grieve for what we lack*”.

Every year, I write of my thankfulness to the team of people who do so much to resource our worship, and the organizational tasks that take place behind the scenes. But this year, I am especially aware of the gift of grace which each person in the churches is and the considerable amount of time and skill which is offered by so many. As some know, 2023 was not the year I personally expected it to be; there were joys and sorrows which led to my being away from the parishes for a time. At Bishop Guli's invitation, I had the privilege of serving for a season as Interim Cathedral Missioner in Chelmsford, in a half-time capacity alongside my role in the Theydon Parishes, but I also felt the pain of bereavement myself in the spring. I will always be grateful especially for the support I received from so many people in the Benefice, which enabled me to have space to grieve and process what had happened.

In particular, I would like to pay tribute to the work and service of Rev Carol Newnham who covered for me and who, in November 2023, was appointed to serve as House for Duty Rector to two parishes in the Diocese of St Alban's. We will miss her greatly, and the good heart that the parishes were in at the end of 2023 owes much to her pastoral ministry and the leadership she has given. Sarah Bowen also moved on from her role as Benefice Administrator and Daria Emery joined the team in that role. Our team of 6 churchwardens, Mary Gill, Margaret Dennis, Jo Shepard, Hilary Mosely, John Chaplin and Andrew Crook continue to be a source of great encouragement, and we are lucky to have such a dedicated team looking after our buildings and so much more. Our Benefice would be much poorer without them. There are so many other people who go above and beyond in the Benefice, but in particular thanks are due to our team of vergers, Ann Clay, Anne Padfield and Carole Fenton who in their respective churches do so much behind the scenes to ensure that services and Occasional Offices run smoothly. And at the same time everyone is important, and everyone is valuable in the kingdom of God. The Theydon Parishes would not be the flourishing place they are without the contributions that each person makes. Financially each parish is solvent and is a going concern and despite the challenges, the total worshipping community has returned to pre-pandemic numbers. There is much to be grateful for.

The Benefice continues to be committed to doing all we can to be a safe space for all, and with the work of Andrea Crombie and John Chaplin as Parish Safeguarding Officers, we have continued to follow the House of Bishops' guidance on Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable adults, including following safer recruitment practices, and ensuring all PCC members and ministers complete regular training as expected by the Church of England. We continued to see significant section of the Sunday congregation being made up of children and young people at St Mary's Theydon Bois and All Saints Theydon Garnon, where Sarah Twitchett (our allocated worker from Red Balloon Foundation has been leading the work) and Alison Mortimer continue respectively to lead the work. Pastoral visiting continues to

happen because people notice one another, but it is true to say that we would greatly benefit from a person whose primary calling in Christ is to animate this kind of caring ministry.

Paul's letter to the Romans reminds people that he is convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not things from past, present or future can make that love smaller. It is true that there are challenges ahead for our Benefice, and there are a number of things which it would be good to have or to achieve. But as our Benefice Vision sets out, our core values are "Faith, Love and Community" and that we seek to live those out by welcoming all, caring and teaching. These are things which can be practiced whether things are going well or when there are challenges, when we are blessed with the things which each parish would like to achieve and just as much can be practiced at the times when our respective parishes may not have achieved all that we set out to do. Let us in the year ahead not give up practicing an awareness of grace, but still be open to noticing the new things which Christ calls us into, but above all, let us value the shared identity we have as parishes working together.