

ST EDMUND'S PARISH, BUNGAY AND HARLESTON, A.G.M.

24th ANNUAL PARISH PRIEST'S REPORT – 30 July 2017

This year (2016/17) ten children were in preparation for their First Holy Communion which they received on 18th June and I take this opportunity of expressing particular thanks to Rebecca Clarke for undertaking the instruction of this group each Sunday morning. In this parish we normally have Confirmations every 3 years but following an exceptional positive response by 16 to a circular letter which I sent out in the autumn, I decided to bring the date forward from next June to this October (25th).

There were two weddings this year, one conducted by an Italian-speaking priest and one, of Amelia Birtwistle, which I conducted in the larger church at Beccles. Brides, it seems, like a grand central aisle.

During the last year we lost only four parishioners through death of which one, Frank Rouson, had already moved out of the parish. Five were baptised, which is below average, and two received into the church. The census in October 2016 showed an increase of 1 in our average Sunday congregations (all Masses combined) to 126 which is an improvement on the decrease of 15 in 2015. This is not a matter for either complacency or alarm but reflects the fact that we are the 7th smallest parish out of the 50 in our diocese.

Financially we continue on the usual knife-edge with income and expenditure finely balanced through the use of a carefully monitored budget – for which prudence I am as always particularly grateful to our Treasurer, Carole Hunt. Last August we replaced the church heating boiler with two smaller units, which have the advantage of providing at least some heat if one were to break down. This was largely funded from internal and external funds, grants and donations. A number of smaller maintenance projects have taken place at both Bungay, such as painting the south side of the presbytery, and at Harleston, where the external timber has been painted and the kitchen renewed to the required standard. The Parish Hall has been partly re-painted by volunteer labour and, by shared funding with the school, the hall has acquired an inter-active screen which has been useful to us for Confirmation classes and to the school for assemblies.

There was a substantial appeal launched by the Diocese, called *Alive in Faith*. There was negotiation here (as also at Beccles and Clare Priory) owing to our own financial independence from the Diocese while recognising our duty to support its broad pastoral mission. The diocese agreed to lower our target and to give generous kick-backs from any over-target funds raised in recognition that we fund our own training and retirement. We were also, at my request, given exemption from the need to use the hard-sell tactics of their professional fundraisers. Nevertheless, I greatly under-estimated the generosity of you, our parishioners, and instead of raising £25,000 over 5 years we raised £86,000 which is 346% over target. We also had one of the highest participation rates at 55%, so it was not just the fruit of a few large donations (welcome though these were). I take this opportunity of thanking you very much for your generous support which, apart from its practical benefits, was a huge relief to me from potential personal stress. Our Parish Pastoral Council have been discussing projects which might be an appropriate and beneficial use of our share of the cash-back windfall when it trickles through over the coming years.

As always I think we should renew our gratitude to those who give generously of their time in carrying out the essential offices both in Bungay and Harleston. It is always dangerous to thank by name for fear of missing someone out, but you all know who they are, whether on the Parish Council, the Finance Committee, The Pastoral Support Network, the Choir and instrumentalists, the managements of our two halls, of the chapel

at Harleston, the rotas for Eucharistic ministry, reading, serving, children's liturgy, welcoming, flower arranging, altar preparation, linen-washing, coffee-making, cash-counting, red-boxing, maintenance, gardening, management of the website or liaison with our chosen charities.

I am grateful to Andy Parris for agreeing to take on the duties of Communications Officer when Mary Kirk set off on her mammoth walk to Rome; unlike many parishes, our parish website is routinely up-dated each weekend with the Newsletter and other items of interest. Thanks also to those who have set-up a fundraising CAFOD stall at Fressingfield which raises cash for the 3rd World. I am especially grateful to Helen Kirby, our Chair of PPC, for letting her arm be twisted and agreeing to serve as Chair for a further year. And I thank her also for arranging a day out on the river with Keith for our Confirmation candidates.

In addition to CAFOD and its overseas aid, we are now in our sixth year of actively supporting a home charity, the Waveney Foodbank, for which I am a trustee, which helps those in need of emergency assistance in the area. This scheme continues to attract a great deal of interest nationally, to the embarrassment of the government (who should themselves be providing a safety net). Thank you to those who, by rota, man the Foodbank distribution centre. More volunteers are needed so please give some thought to that.

Our Chapel at St Thomas More, Harleston, continues as a fairly distinct geographical congregation with a strong sense of community. Owing to the regular hiring-out of its premises, it is largely self-supporting but the wear and tear on the premises can be quite heavy. A huge thanks to Peter Williams who has been looking after it for many more years than I have been here.

. There is mixed news concerning our Primary School (St Edmund's) now part of The Catholic Multi-Academy Trust which runs all eight Catholic schools in Norfolk and North Suffolk. The Head Teacher, Veronica Short, was able to announce a significant improvement of results in every subject to above expectation; but there is a worry about intake numbers (and hence finance) which the notably dedicated staff are working hard to address.

This year we repeated the *Day of Recollection* in Lent which seems to have been appreciated. Last year's Parish Outing to Leiston Abbey in glorious sunshine was a great success. This year we went to Walberswick where it was dry but overcast.

At Downside Abbey, our sponsor and trustee, Prior Administrator Dom Leo Maidlow Davis, enters his final year in post so there needs to be an abbatial election within the coming year. The number of priests in the Community at Downside is critically low and I am no longer confident that I will be simply replaced when I finally retire back to the abbey – which is likely to be in the Summer of 2019. As I have warned before, this may trigger the need for a generous response and increased input from our parishioners and the remaining clergy.

Last month I celebrated the eleventh anniversary of my arrival in the parish on a ten year assignment and I am now in my 77th year, so by Canon Law I am now on annual renewal of my appointment as your parish priest.

So, as always, I would like to express my thanks for all the help and support I have received from you, which I really appreciate. Finally I would like to encourage you all to give thanks for the many blessings we have received and urge prayer for the resolution of the issues that trouble us, both local and national - and indeed universal.

Fr Charles 28.7.17