



## The United Benefice of Coxheath, East Farleigh, Hunton, Linton, and West Farleigh

[www.unitedbenefice.church](http://www.unitedbenefice.church)

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### A prayerful consideration of Benefice life A letter from the Rector

Dear fellow worshipper and church member,

At the last round of annual meetings, I asked us all to be praying about the future for us as a benefice as we seek to find what God would want us to be doing to build the church and face up to the challenges of life in a multi-parish benefice in rural South Maidstone.

Since that time, the clergy team and the ministry team have been making a prayerful consideration of the current reality and the way forward. As we prayed and talked, it became clear that there are some issues that we must face up to, and that doing more together is critical.

We have discussed these proposals with church wardens and they will go to PCCs in January for further consultation. You are invited to respond to me so that I can include responses in our discussions.

Peter

In order to provide some direction for the benefice, we have worked on and agreed a shared statement of purpose, or vision.

#### Considerations about overall mission and purpose.

A new statement of purpose for the Benefice:  
**Growing as disciples of Christ, to build the kingdom of God**

This is underpinned by the following supporting principles: That we ...

#### 1. Know and cherish who we are in Christ

- Foundational to all we are and do is to recognise that we are created, called, equipped and empowered by God to love him and to do his will.

*As God's people, we are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17); members of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27); have transformed minds (Romans 12:2); have the peace of God (Phil 4:7); have power through the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:7) and are ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20)*

- Developing this principle through worship and teaching (Sundays and mid-week); discovery of our own gifts and talents; encouragement through testimony (during worship and through newsletters)

#### 2. Acknowledge and be aware of all we are doing in his name

- There is so much that goes on unnoticed in the fellowship and in the community, and the opportunity for being aware and celebrating this is restricted by the challenges of multi-parish and the infrequent and sporadic attendance of both ministers and congregation.

*Acts 2:44 All the believers were together and had everything in common.*

*1 Thessalonians 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*

A change of approach around Sunday morning rotas will create more opportunity for being together; and an encouragement to be church together through personal relationships and small groups could enhance this aspect of our life together.

#### 3. Deepen our own faith as his disciples

- We have a good foundation of faithful people, but the context in which we worship and seek to live out our lives as Christians is ever changing. We need to build our confidence in our faith, individually and collectively, if we are to be those who build the kingdom of God in this time and place.

*Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

*Matthew 28:16-20 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

- To achieve this, we must go beyond Sunday morning teaching and develop a life of study and fellowship in small groups. We have Next Steps, the Ladies Prayer Groups and Beacon Men's Prayer groups in place, but we need to do more.

#### **4. Know and recognise that God has a mission and that we are his church, called to fulfil that mission.**

"It is not the church of God that has a mission, but the God of mission who has a church." God's very being is missional – his mission is to reconcile all of creation to himself.

*Colossians 1:19-20 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in the Son and through him to reconcile all things to himself by making peace through the blood of his cross—through him, whether things on earth or things in heaven.*

#### **5. Focus our activities and efforts on fulfilling the mission of God**

This should be a touchstone, almost a mantra, that we test everything against. How is what we are doing now, or plan to do, reconciling people and building the kingdom of God? If it isn't, we should stop doing it or change what we are doing. Does this activity accord with one of the five marks of mission? 1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; 2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers; 3. To respond to human need by loving service; 4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation; 5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

*2 Corinthians 5:19-20 In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's trespasses against them, and he has given us the message of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making His plea through us. We plead with you on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God!"*

#### **Principle issues for consideration**

- Sustainability is questionable in our current model

We cannot depend on having three ordained and two lay ministers in the future. Even now, the sense of well-being, anticipation and expectation around the good of our life of worship (Sundays and beyond) is at a low ebb. The burden of administration and preparation for all we do prevents the incumbent from being future focussed, and we have been in maintenance mode for too long.

- This requires a structural change to release the incumbent's energy and be workable with 1 ordained minister for future sustainability.
- We need to move to a more missional mode as a benefice, not just five parishes. There is no critical mass of people in the parishes (possibly excepting Coxheath). There are things happening, but it is against a backdrop of fighting to survive, not growing the kingdom of God in us and others. There is a low level of awareness of encouragements because we are never together in a mode where we are sharing or expecting it.
- In order to reach out, we need to be deepening our collective discipleship, helping people to feel a part of something bigger, discovering their gifts, being empowered and released. This can only happen in small groups outside Sunday worship.
- In addition, we need to be striving for excellence in our worship. We should not compromise the essential nature of the parishes but celebrate them and make the best of them.

#### **Proposed responses**

- Reduction of the number of services each Sunday. A focus on the benefice through a weekly hub service at 11am to build coherence, consistency and the church as the body of Christ.
- Workshops for those involved in music, intercessions, bible reading. There are pockets of excellence around the benefice and we can and should learn from each other.
- Development of discipleship groups. Possible appointment of someone to focus on this as a "leader of groups" to identify the various needs and opportunities.
- Ensuring that we take pastoral responsibility for our people. "Feed my sheep" – we should seek to support all who worship with us, now and in the future.
- Identification of focal ministers to support the parishes during a period of transition.
- Take every opportunity to do things together e.g. sharing fundraising events.

#### **Criteria for a change in the worship pattern**

- Sustainability into the future with a single ordained minister.
- A pattern that releases the energy and vision as outlined above.
- Simplification and standardisation of times to create more coherence, with options for variety of services in each parish.
- The creation of a weekly "hub" service in which all can share and be supported.
- Acknowledgement of the reality of the current situation in each parish, and a preservation of the existing ethos or churchmanship.
- An ongoing commitment to major festivals (e.g. Easter, Christmas, Remembrance) in each parish.
- Fifth Sunday Benefice Services rotated between East Farleigh, Hunton, Linton and West Farleigh.
- Midweek services remain unchanged (Monthly Compline at East Farleigh and Holy Communion at Linton, weekly Holy Communion at Coxheath).

Here follows a potential new worship pattern that meets the criteria as mentioned above. The green services are non-communion and can be flexible in style and use. Pale blue are options where there are choirs, to be decided in consultation with parishes.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Coxheath 8am				
9.30				
11.00	Holy Communion CW	Morning Prayer/Church Family Worship	Holy Communion CW	Morning Prayer/Church Family Worship
East Farleigh 8am		Holy Communion BCP		Holy Communion BCP
9.30	Morning Prayer/Matins		Holy Communion CW	
11.00				
Hunton 8am				
9.30	Holy Communion CW		Morning Prayer/Church Family Worship	
11.00				
Linton 8am				
9.30	Morning Prayer/Church Family Worship	Holy Communion CW		Morning Prayer/Matins
11.00				
West Farleigh 8am	Holy Communion BCP			
9.30		Morning Prayer/Church Family Worship		Holy Communion CW
11.00				

## Questions and Answers

Q: What does it mean to be more “Missional”

A: God has given us, as his ambassadors here on earth, the role, privilege and task of doing all we can to bring about his mission, which is to bring all of creation into a relationship with him – a ministry of reconciliation. We do this by sharing the love of Christ with those whom we meet and by introducing them to the peace and the hope that comes through a life-changing encounter with the risen Lord. We do this primarily as the body of Christ – his church – and as a collective.

Q: What is involved in building discipleship?

A: To be a disciple is to be a learner, so a focus on learning more about Jesus and going deeper into our relationship with him (and each other). It is not possible to do that simply by meeting on a Sunday morning, and so opportunities to come together at other times will be sought.

Q: How do we build the kingdom of God?

A: God’s kingdom is not an earthly one, but is the collective of all those who believe in him and follow his commandments and commission. Learning together to build a strong foundation of church, and then bringing others into that same relationship is how we build the kingdom.

Q: Why the focus on excellence in worship?

A: Each parish has its own strengths, and we need to build on those and ensure that when we invite people to come to church they experience something that causes them to want to come back and discover more. Doing the best we can for God is exciting, and we can learn from each other as we do that.

Q: Why do some churches have more services than others in the proposed new rota?

A: This is based on the current attendance and viability of services as we best understand it, with some negotiation around the 8am services with respect to where they would be well received.

Q: Why are 8am services not shared across all churches?

A: In discussion with churchwardens, it was felt that this was the patter which would most likely be acceptable and workable.

Q: What do you mean by a “hub” service?

A: An opportunity for all to come together week by week, and for the ministry team to support each other. A time for sharing the challenges and joys of a life of worship together.

Q: What about those without transport?

A: We will gladly look to arrange lifts for people who need them!

Q: Will the content and structure of the services stay the same?

A: Initially, yes, but this gives an opportunity to look at the services we have and see where we might adjust them to better suit the vision and reflect each parish’s ethos and strengths. For example, where there are choirs, we might consider more sung elements in services. Any changes will be discussed with PCCs.

Q: What about major festivals such as Easter and Christmas?

A: Major festivals and events have always had services in each parish church, and we will continue to ensure that happens. Where there are not enough ministers to lead five concurrent services, we are able to draw upon ministers from wider afield.

Q: Will we still have benefice services on fifth Sundays?

A: Yes. We will still have a single service rotated around the parishes, but will do so in East Farleigh, Hunton, Linton and West Farleigh, excluding Coxheath.