

Dear Bishop Nicholas,  
Here is our answer to the questionnaire on 'Let us Talk'. Much depends upon the outcome of the pastoral re-arrangement which is under way.  
Being the 'only Roman on the wall', the past three years have been a struggle to resurrect the Benefice, but I am happy to say that things are now very much better, there is a strong sense of Christian purpose and the 'sheep' have smiles on their faces!  
Their one concern is what will happen when I have to relinquish my post on the re-ordering the Benefices. They will not survive without the care of a full time Stipendiary Priest.  
Best wishes,  
Michael

The Reverend Michael Anderson

## **Let us Talk. Responses from the Gifle Valley.**

### **A bit of history.**

There are three Parishes in the Gifle Valley; Bradford Abbas with Clifton Maybank, Beer Hackett and Thornford. Some seven years ago it was decided that when the current Rector left the Benefice, he would be replaced by a House for Duty Priest. The said Rector left in September 2009 and there was an interregnum until March 2010. At this point moral in the parishes was particularly low, they had been starved of pastoral care, spiritual direction was in disarray and two of the PCCs were effectively bankrupt; they had not paid their full diocesan quota for a number of years and they owed the diocese substantial sums, yet they had virtually no reserves. Church attendance had fallen. The current incumbent, a House For Duty NSM, has found it necessary to work at least six days a week over the last three years and to go into pastoral 'overdrive' in order to resurrect these parishes. Happily much has been achieved in restoring the moral and increasing the church attendance. All three parishes have now paid the full diocesan quota for the first time in years. The Benefice is now in a position to move forward, but there is a certain amount of apprehension as to how the proposed new Team Ministry will work, because it is strongly held that the improvement in the Benefice can only be maintained if the Gifle Valley is put under the spiritual direction and pastoral care of a Stipendiary Priest. This is also considered to be essential if the recently built strong relationship between the Church and the two Church Primary Schools is to be maintained.

### **The Three PCCs met separately to discuss their answers to the five questions.**

#### **1. The Personality and Character of our local churches.**

It has to be said that, despite demographic similarities, each parish has a completely different personality and character.

**Bradford Abbas** is a large village whose population is just under 1000 and which is surrounded by a number of farms. A large proportion of the working population are employed in Yeovil. It has what is considered to be the most beautiful Church in West Dorset, which is quite large by village standards and has a particularly fine organ. The villagers are extremely proud of their Church and set up a well supported Heritage Fund to pay for its upkeep approximately twelve years ago. There is a broad churchmanship in this village and both BCP and Common Worship services are held during the month; there being one service of BCP Communion, one Matins with BCP communion, one Choral Evensong, one Common Worship Communion, and an informal Family Service in which children are encouraged to do the readings and lead the intercessional prayers. If there is a fifth Sunday in the month we hold a Benefice Common Worship service by rotation. There are two specific school weekday services each term for which the children write most of the liturgy and lead some of the worship. These are particularly well attended by the parents and have led to a significant rise in the request for baptisms in the last two years. Weekday Festival Services held as Benefice services and are rotated between the parishes. Approximately 35 people attend Sunday services regularly, but the church is always full for Christmas, the Carol Service and Easter Day.

The school assemblies for Key Stage 2 are held in the church and take place monthly, whilst the Incumbent also takes monthly Key Sage 1 assemblies in the school. He also visits the pre-school group to read and explain Bible stories to the children. The Parent/Teachers Association combines with the Church members to hold an annual village fete, dividing the proceeds between the School and the Church. There is an effective Events Committee who plan and hold a variety of events, including concerts, both in the village and in the Church, as a form of outreach and also to raise funds for the life of the Church. Many of the regular churchgoers act as pastoral workers within the village and they are co-ordinated by two people chosen by the PCC. Across the street from the church there is an excellent village hall, but sadly the local Post Office closed last year. Bradford Abbas is a happy but not overtly religious village. There is a Pub next to the Church which is useful at times of funerals. There is one thriving lay-led prayer group in the village. A food bank within the Church has been recently established to supply food for the needy of Yeovil and Sherborne.

**Thornford** is altogether a much more religious village in which there are a number of former Baptists and Methodists whose chapels have closed down and who have turned to the Church of England. The churchmanship of this village is predominantly evangelical and there is more lay involvement in this village whose adult population numbers just under 900. There are two thriving lay-led church groups in the village and quarterly religious based men's breakfast groups meet in the village hall. There are three farms in this village and most of the working population are employed in Sherborne. Roughly a third of the population are retired and there is some poverty in the village. There is a well supported food bank within the church for the needy families of the village. The village has a post office, pub and a good village hall. That said, it struggles to survive financially. Here again there is an excellent Church Primary School who also have two weekday services a term, largely prepared and led by the children; there is much support for these services from the parents. The Incumbent takes fortnightly assemblies in this school and also takes general subject classes in the school at the children's request! There is also pre-school group which is visited by the Incumbent for Bible stories etc. The following Sunday services take place monthly: One early morning BCP Communion, one informal family service of Morning Prayer, one informal Family Communion, one Common Worship Morning Prayer, one Common Worship Communion and an evening BCP Communion. In this village there is an elderly NSM who assists the Incumbent by taking two services per month. The average Sunday attendance is just over 50, but again the church is filled at Christmas, Easter and for the Carol and Harvest Festival services. Morning prayers are said in the Church on Wednesday mornings; these are sometimes lay-led. A Village Fete Committee has been established and there have been two very popular fetes held to raise money for the Church; another is planned for this summer. This committee is being encouraged to have more fundraising events, both in and out of the Church, and to provide more outreach to the villagers though entertainment. A group of about 20 pensioners meet for coffee in the Pub each Tuesday morning; the Incumbent tries to attend these as they are a useful source of information on pastoral need.

**Beer Hackett** is an entirely different story because its community consist of only 69 people of very mixed ages and nature. The village has three farms, but there is only one road with houses either side of it. There is also an industrial unit which provides cars for those confined to wheelchairs; about 25% of the working population work in this factory so the village is very dependant upon it. The company is experiencing some financial difficulties, but the Incumbent, a former Merchant Banker, is helping it to raise more capital. Hitherto Church life, such as it is, has been dominated by traditionalists who insisted that all services were from BCP. In the past they held one service per month alternating between Matins and Communion. On arrival the Incumbent added a further service per month so that they had the latter services each month. Regular attendance varies between 8 and 12 people. As in the other Churches, Festival services are well attended, as are the Benefice services when they are held in Beer Hackett. Unfortunately the PCC have elected to go back to one service per month, alternating between Matins and a shortened Communion one month, and an informal Morning Prayer and Informal Communion the following month. There was remarkably little social activity within the village, there being no pub or hall, and there was an observable social divide in it. To overcome this, a Fete Committee was formed and a very

successful Fete, which pulled the villagers together, was held. A second one is planned for this summer. A 'Way of the Cross' walk is now held from one end of the village to the other on Good Friday afternoon, and this has proved to be quite popular, attracting up to 40 people in the last three years. The Fete Committee are now being encouraged to organise recitals in the Church as a further form of outreach and it has been decided to initiate a stewardship campaign to enhance the Church's financial position.

## **2. The priorities of our local Churches.**

First and foremost it is to consolidate and maintain the much improved sense of fellowship within the Christian Community and to enhance its sense of mission and commitment to outreach. We wish to maintain the strong bond between the Church and the two schools, whilst making church attendance a more attractive option for the teenagers within the villages. We need to attract more adults under the age of 50 to become regular attendees at Sunday Services. Although the financial position of both Bradford Abbas and Thornford Churches has been stabilised, there is now a requirement to build up their reserves with a concerted stewardship campaign. The level of lay pastoral care is good, but it needs to become more formalised to ensure that no one slips through the net.

## **3. The one thing we would like to take on in the coming year.**

In order to attract many more young families there is a great need to establish a form of 'Messy Church' within the Benefice. To this end the Head teacher of Thornford School and the Incumbent have consulted the Diocesan Director of Education and are drawing up plans to raise the money to build a suitable school assembly hall in the school grounds which can be used by the school and the church. This will have to be a three year project, but would enable us to establish a 'Messy Church' and also enable us to establish a much needed youth club. The village hall cannot be used for these purposes because there is no storage for the necessary equipment.

## **4. Ways in which we can work together.**

Over the last 22 years I have taught the children of Granvilles Wootton and the surrounding villages tennis on Summer Saturday mornings on the village court. I have taught between 35 and 45 children each year and this has resulted in five of our children playing for the County. The children love their tennis and this has resulted in a form sporting fellowship amongst the players, some of whom are now adults and I am asked to marry them and baptise their children instead, thereby maintaining the link with the church. There are excellent sports fields in two of our villages and many others within the Deaconry. It is a fact that the best way to reach the hearts of children is through such things as sport; it also attracts much approval by their parents! I strongly believe that we should get together and try to set up village sports of various kinds for the children on Saturdays rather than Sundays, which seems to be the day on which most sporting activities for the young take place in this area, Saturdays being reserved for the adults. Should we succeed in this they might even come to church on Sundays!

## **5. The best way to measure the quality of Church Life.**

We can do this by looking at the impact that the Church community is having on the rest of the community. If the Church is seen to be putting on regular social events and providing pastoral outreach to those who are not committed Christians this would provide a measurable impact on the community as a whole.