

The Astwell Benefice

*St Mary Magdalene Helmdon with Stuchbury and St Lawrence Radstone
and St James the Great Syresham with St John the Evangelist Whitfield,
St Mary & St Peter Lois Weedon with Weston and Plumpton
and St Mary the Virgin Wappenham*



To the Parishioners of the Astwell Benefice from your PCCs..

Faced with what is proving to be an almost impossible task on their own, our PCCs have decided to join together to trial a new and innovative way of working.

In doing so, we hope we do so with God's blessing and in the hope that we are blazing a new trail that other rural churches can follow.

For some years now rural parishes throughout the country have been struggling and we here in the Astwell Benefice are no exception to this. We, here in the Astwell Benefice, have found ourselves way off meeting all our Parish's financial commitments and are unable to find all the officers we need to serve on our parish-based Parochial Church Councils (PCCs).

Traditionally, along with the Rector and Churchwardens, Parochial Church Councils throughout the country have been given the legal responsibility, not only for overseeing the raising of income that pays both for the maintenance and repair of our ancient Church buildings, but also ensuring that ministry continues across our Parishes.

And it has to be said that the fact our Church buildings are maintained to such a high standard is in no small part down to the tireless extra work undertaken by our "Friends Groups" in some of our parishes and the ability of some Parishes to draw on Fabric specific Trusts and Funds. These Friends and Trusts represent those in our parishes who care deeply about our Church buildings and they have played a crucial role in allowing our PCCs to be successful in this area of their responsibility and have our grateful thanks.

However, our PCCs are also required to pay for the Ministry in this Benefice. This provides regular parish-based services, Weddings, Baptisms, our Funeral ministry, our work in our schools and in our wider communities. This cost also includes the legal cover required to keep our Churches as historic public buildings and all the State legalities involved in marriage and burial. These costs are paid via a "Benefice Share".

This Benefice Share (a sort of Church council tax) is paid yearly to the Diocese and this cost has traditionally been divided out between the parishes, who are then required to meet a "Parish Share" themselves. These individual "Shares" are then combined at Diocesan level.

Here in the Astwell Benefice, with one priest, we pay one of the lower "bands" of Benefice Share, but we are still required to find £56,000 per annum and, at the moment, even dividing it up, we are unable to pay this in full.

It has therefore been decided that while it is clear that our buildings can be cared for at Parish level, the costs of our Ministry needs to be more of a Benefice-wide responsibility.

And so, over the next three years the Astwell Benefice will embark on a trial, that will see the maintenance and running costs associated with our Church buildings remain the responsibility of individual parishes, while the Ministry and Mission and its associated costs will now become the responsibility of a Joint Benefice PCC.

This three year Trial has come out of six months of consultation and considered debate on how we might move forward. It is based on strong Christian principles of support and nurture and a desire to further God's Kingdom here in the Astwell Benefice.

This Trial has been completely endorsed by the Diocesan Secretariat and by the Archdeacon of Northampton, who claim this as an "exceptional proposal of depth and thought" and a blueprint for future work in the Diocese.

Yet at Parish level little, if anything will change.

The income that is raised each year through collections, regular giving, generous donations and fund raising will be allocated in the same way it always has, and will still be paid into the Parish. The income will continue to pay for: The costs of heating and lighting and insuring the building to allow it to remain open to the public as well as any maintenance and repairs of the building itself. And, as before, any remaining income will go to pay the Parish's Ministry costs, through the Share payments.

But under this three-year Trial, instead of the buildings being maintained by a parish- based PCC with other responsibilities as in the past, they will now be overseen by a newly formed group – the "Fabric Committee". This Committee will, as the PCC has done in the past, continue to operate with the help of existing Friends Groups or funds ring-fenced for repairs and maintenance. But it is hoped as this group has a focused remit, they can concentrate on maintaining the Church Building as a community asset.

Under the new Trial, the income raised by the parishes towards the Benefice Share will be managed by the new "Benefice Parochial Church Council" (BPCC), which will be responsible for Mission and Ministry across the Parishes. This BPCC will be made up of a representative from every Parish elected by their electoral role as well as a Churchwarden from Helmdon, Lois Weedon, Syresham and Wappenham and will require just one set of officers.

The income raise in and by the parishes towards their share will now be combined together and managed by the BPCC who will supplement this parish income with funds raised from Benefice - wide events. This prevents any one Parish "failing to pay" their ministry and mission costs.

This BPCC will do its work through Committees with remits for such matters as Worship, Finance, Social and Fundraising. Anyone with an interest in the subject matter of these Committees, whether a regular churchgoer or not will be welcomed on board.

We plan to start the 3-year Trial in January 2018.

It is important to stress that this a "Trial", there will be no legal changes, instead there will be flexibility all the way along, as we embark on this Trial to make changes and additions to make sure this works for us. There is also the ability for any Parish to leave the Trial if they find it is not working for them

If you have any questions, please do speak to a member of your PCC, your Churchwardens or Rev'd Carole and a full copy of the Proposal can be found on the website: www.astwellparishes.org.uk.

It is a new way, but it is one that comes with the blessing of the Diocese and all our PCCs. *(There were no votes against this proposed Trial from any of our PCC members)*. Therefore, we hope, you will give this venture both your support and your prayers as we journey together.

Yours in Christ
The Astwell Benefice PCCs