

Vision Night February 23rd 2017

Psalm 25

In you, Lord my God, I put my trust.

⁴Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.

⁵Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour,
and my hope is in you all day long.

I just wanted to start by reading those verses, which were from my bible reading yesterday morning. Whatever the future holds I put my trust in God, I ask him to show me his ways and my hope is in him all day long. He is my God the only saviour.

This is my 5th Vision Night at Cogges and I think I have a better idea of what's going on than I did at my first one 4 years ago, when I was barely a month into post. I hope it wasn't too obvious.

Once again I want to start with some thank you's.

First of all, most important person Sue who continues to support and encourage me in all that I do. Since our last Vision Night we've celebrated 25 years of marriage and one of my highlights of this last year was sharing that picnic on a Sunday in July with many of you.

Thereafter in no particular order....

Our Churchwardens, James Webster and Gerry Wait, who meet with me regularly and are great critical friends I appreciate their support and also their challenge.

As well thank you to all those who have served on the PCC this last year. Sometimes we've had to make difficult decisions but I'm grateful for your vision, your faith and your encouragement. Particular thanks to Kathryn Smith who is stepping down this time.

Also the officers: Harvey who chairs our meetings, Malcolm who is the most diligent Church secretary in the country and Keith Harwood who once described himself to me as a bean counter but who is much more than that and gives huge amounts of time to ensuring that our books balance and that we are wise in the budget decisions we make.

I also want to publicly thank Rev Margaret Dixon who has been a great support while I've been Vicar at North Leigh. Many of you will know that at the end of December I resigned as Vicar of North Leigh and Margaret will be installed as Vicar in April, which also means we are no longer a plurality which is great because nobody knew what that meant or how to say it. Our partnership in the gospel continues but I believe that this has been a good decision for North Leigh, for Cogges, for Margaret and myself.

I am however still Vicar of South Leigh but very grateful to Rev Nick Pike who is our self supporting associate minister with primary responsibility for South Leigh.

Retired Clergy and Lay Ministers

Ministry leaders and volunteers.

This year we've seen some changes in the staff team. We've had an administrative restructuring and that wasn't easy for any of those involved but we did need to restructure and the extra hours and new skills that we now have in the office are already bearing significant fruit in resourcing the ministry of the Church. I have said previously and say again that we are very grateful for all that Mo and Elaine did give to the life of our community.

The last few months we've been forming as a new team and it's been great to welcome Sara and Judy and indeed Ben Osman and Beth Evans our interns. When I arrived 4 and a bit years ago team meetings were 4 of us, we now usually have at least 9 and sometimes 10 or 11 at staff meetings.

We have a great staff team and I'm grateful for their friendship, support and hard work.

One of the members of the team who is not here tonight is Andy. He is running our Alpha course at the Fleece, which I will say more about later. Since last year he has started training for ordination, however having him in the Operations Role and now working with Judy means that over the last year we have managed to complete a number of projects, some of which are more evident than others.

The Car park is now safer, better looking and controllable and very much appreciated by members of the community who have stopped me to say how good they think it looks.

The unseen things have included electrical inspection, upgrade and initial decorating of the old school house.

Something very few of you will have spotted is that we now have a roof alarm to protect the church from lead thieves who are operating in Oxfordshire, having targeted 55 churches in the last year.

We have new projectors, pc and wifi in the Church – we're just trying to get them to talk to each other – but that will happen.

Andy has also been very involved in the development of the vision for the 9.15 service and the subsequent growth we have seen. A year ago we were probably averaging 30–40 people, now it's usually 40–50 with sometimes more than 60.

We've seen similar steady growth in the evening service and I'm very grateful to Rich for providing a lead in that service. We are seeing it as a service where we can train younger speakers and service leaders and it's gone from a weekly average of 20–30 to 30–40 with again occasionally more and last Sunday we were at 48. These are encouraging growth signs – we regularly see new people coming to 10.30am and our 8am remains healthy despite some of our committed members passing away last year and some others no longer being able to attend because of mobility issues. We have seen some new people joining that service,

I know for some of you 8am doesn't exist on a Sunday morning but we do pray for you.

All of these indicate growth and we want to continue to **Cultivate a Church where people flourish through connecting with God, each other and their world.**

Healthy things grow.

We've seen growth in our ministry to older members of our community through Cogges Seniors. It's also great that we have our first Cogges holiday planned with the northern pilgrimage taking place in May and thank you to Gerald and Martin for organising this event.

We've seen incredible growth at the other end of our Church and wider community family with the two Cogglets groups being extraordinarily popular. There were 127 guests at the Madley Cogglets last week. As we've heard, our children's and youth work continues to thrive and Kirsty and Heidi are absolute stars.

Right now we're running the biggest alpha courses that we've seen in the last four years with well over 30 guests.

With all of this good news it would be easy to become complacent, to think let's just keep doing what we are doing and all will be well.

However:

- 6000 teenagers can't be held within the education system in Oxfordshire because of a diagnosed mental health issue.
- Britain is facing a "crisis of fatherlessness" in which almost half of all children born today will not be living with both parents by the time they are 15. – Andy Cook CEO Centre for Social Justice 2017.
- CSJ figures show that by the age of five 48% of children in low-income families are not living with both parents.
- Supporting parenting should be a top priority for those trying to tackle poverty. – Christian Guy, former CEO Centre for Social Justice 2017.
- On average three children in every Oxfordshire classroom suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder. – Oxfordshire Children's Needs Analysis 2015
- Over half (51%) of all people aged 75 and over live alone (Office of National Statistics, 2010) – Campaign to End Loneliness
- The number of people in Oxfordshire over the age of 85 is expected to double in the next 20 years.
- 16–17% of working people in our region are home workers, this is increasing and is one of the highest ranked areas in Britain for numbers of home workers. (ONS 2014)

The reality is that someone said to me recently 'Witney is bleeding', that there are significant increases in family breakdown, and anxiety and mental health issues among children and young people are on the increase.

Isaiah 58

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Our Response:

We have identified 5 groups of people within our own community who we see as the most in need of support:

- Parents of young children
- Lonely and Isolated
- Vulnerable families
- Youth/children
- Home Workers

We're going to continue to think about our ministry response in these areas.

Very practically we intend this year to refit the kitchen and toilets in the Church centre, and we may well use some of the legacy that Keith mentioned.

The reality is that we're limited to when we can use the Church centre for weekday ministry because of the pre-school and actually on a Sunday our children and young people have outgrown the centre. Some of the children's groups meet in the Youth Hub and our youth go to the Blake School and while that's great that we can use the Blake, Ben our intern pointed out to me in an email this week:

“I think the act of travelling 10 minutes to a completely different site/building adds to the feeling of separation and disengagement of the young people from the church.”

Folks there are things we will need to do to continue to keep this wonderful building water tight and ship shape but the need for a bigger space has not gone away. In the last year some of us have visited other new builds, which has led to some building envy, however we've taken advice from others who have set out on this journey. We're no way ready to press the accelerator yet but with Witney growing by 25% in the next ten years the need for larger and more suitable space for seven day a week ministry is not going to go away.

One of the key messages I received as we visited other church leaders who have gone through this challenge is that any building is the **vehicle for the vision** not the vision itself. Our vision is to see Witney flourish, to see the broken restored, to see the captives set free. We will do that regardless of what building we do or don't have but we will continue to look for opportunities to develop better ministry spaces.

One of the keys to whatever happens in the future is continuing to harness the potential of the people resources we have in this place and as a staff team we're really focusing on discipleship this year and how we can encourage that further in ourselves and each other.

As part of my sabbatical I am going to be spending time looking at leadership development and how Churches raise up more lay leaders. In September Sue and I will be starting the CPAS Growing leaders course with a group of those of you who are wanting to develop as leaders in our community.

In the next year we are going to see some further staff changes. Many of you are aware that Heidi who has been working part time as our youth worker got married to Nik in August and Nik is training for ordination. Nik's curacy will be starting in June at Romsey Abbey in Hampshire, quite selfishly I think, he's taking Heidi with him. So our youth worker will be leaving at the end of May. It gives me great pleasure to announce that we have appointed a successor and Ben Osman will be starting full time as our youth worker on the 1st June.

Why full time – the difference between Heidi's part time role and Ben's full time is one that effectively the PCC in faith have added to the budget.

I believe that while we have invested heavily in children's and young people's work over the last couple of years we should continue to do so.

Two days ago on the Evangelical Alliance Facebook page it asked this question: Did you know 86% of people who come to faith in the UK are under 25?

Ben gets married in the summer to Claire who is the course leader of GreenHouse which is a 10-month Christian Gap Year project, geared especially for those who want to explore a future in youth ministry. It is part of Reign ministries in Bicester – building on the very positive contribution and development of this year's interns we are going to partner with Reign and hopefully have a couple of new interns working with us in September.

When I arrived four years ago I was presented with a few current issues. The biggest was probably the Old School House and what to do about it. For me and many others it was clear we had to buy it from the Blake education trust. The money used for that purchase is used by the Trust for the benefit of the Blake school. One of the benefits was to fund a part time community-school link worker for 15 hours a week to work with children and families and where appropriate to help us to further support the school. The PCC decided that they wanted to make the hours up to 20 hours a week in light of all of the developing need in our community. Today I had the pleasure of interviewing three very good candidates for that role with the head and deputy at Blake. I am delighted to announce that Judith Ledden, who is a member of our Church, has been appointed to that role.

Folks we continue to push Beyond the Lychgate because we have a message of hope and a God who wants to transform lives.

My bible reading from this morning included:

Exodus 33

12 Moses said to the Lord, 'You have been telling me, "Lead these people," but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, "I know you by name and you have found favour with me." **13** If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you.

Remember that this nation is your people.'

14 The Lord replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'

15 Then Moses said to him, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.'