

A vision for our future



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Vision Document v1.2

Introduction

This document is a working draft.

Churches need vision. Proverbs 29:18 is often quoted in this context, usually in the Authorised Version: “without vision, the people perish.”

However, unlike businesses and other organisations, churches do not always require *vision statements*. They certainly do not need a document to describe their general purpose and overall intention: after all, the scriptures make the general calling of the church quite clear.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:18-20 (NRSV¹)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 2:42

So why do we, as two churches in one Benefice, need a vision document?

The Manningtree Benefice has existed in one form or another for very many years. In fact, the first Rector of the Benefice (of Mistley and Bradfield) was Matthew Thompson in 1779. Over the years, many changes have occurred within the churches and within the wider culture. We have seen buildings come and go: St Michael's on Manningtree High Street; St Mary the Virgin (the towers); St Mary's on Mistley Heath; and St John's

in Horsley Cross. There have been many incumbents, too: since 1900, there have been some 22 Rectors or priests in charge. We have seen government change, both nationally and locally, and we have seen our communities evolve and develop with new housing, changing patterns of work and family life, different expectations of leisure time and education, and so on.

Some of these changes have occurred over a long period of time, but there have been many significant shifts in just the last few years. Most significantly, the way that information is distributed and consumed has radically changed: the World Wide Web, an invention which has radically changed the world, simply didn't exist thirty years ago. The web has led to people sharing vast amounts of information instantly, and it has also led to much misinformation being presented as the truth. In fact, the expression “post-truth”, which sums up so many of our modern thought patterns, was first coined in 1992, and became commonplace in 2016 when the Oxford English Dictionary declared it the ‘word of the year.’

The truth is that all of us, whether young or more mature in years, have experienced significant changes in the culture of the world around us within our lifetimes, and we know that the way in which the world communicates, views truth, and accepts authority has irreversibly changed.

In the midst of all this, the church stands as the bearer of eternal truth. This is our mission – to share the good news of Jesus Christ to those around us in every generation. But the changes around us mean that we must periodically review our methods and approach to this mission: and this is the primary focus of this vision document.

This document is a work in progress, and is the result of much prayer and conversation. More prayer is needed, and we need to wait on the

¹ All scripture references are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

Spirit together as we seek to refine and put into action those things he's calling us to. It's important to say, before we begin, that by discerning a new vision we're not undermining, downplaying, or dismissing anything that's gone before. For many years, faithful and dedicated people have sought after God in our churches, and he has been, and is, at work amongst us already. We give thanks for the journey we've been on already, and those who've worked to make it possible, even as we look ahead to the next destination on the road.

What do we mean by vision?

'Vision' is a slightly slippery concept, and often means different things to different people, but most would agree that it has a lot to do with *seeing which way you need to go*. Without a clear vision, or sense of our desired destination, the churches are at risk of going in circles, or even spiralling downwards into self-destructive patterns of thought and behaviour. God has often given clear vision to his people:

"Noah was told to build his ark; Abraham to establish a nation for God. Joseph was sustained through captivity by dreams given when he was still a lad. Moses' vision saw well beyond his lifetime and arguably still guides his people 3,500 years later. The judges and kings Saul, David and Solomon were men and women of vision. The prophets saw—even though they were not always listened to. Jesus has a clear vision of his work and call, and leaves his disciples with a vision of a kingdom growing to the ends of the earth with them as part of it."

Mark Tanner, *How to Develop Vision*

Imagine going on a long journey in a car. You might begin by packing and by letting everyone know that you are going. You would hopefully prepare the car, too – making sure that the tyres are fresh and fully inflated, checking oil, water, and windscreen fluids, perhaps having it serviced to ensure that everything will run well. You might consider joining a roadside assistance scheme, so

that if you break down on the way you can get help. And you would take food and drink for the journey, and maybe some cash so you could stop on the way and get anything else you need. Finally, you would make sure that your maps or satnav were up-to-date. Without these, you wouldn't be able to find your way.

Many churches work on the assumption that the vision is a bit like a map, with the route clearly marked for the way ahead. We certainly need the map, and we would do well to think carefully beforehand about the route we might take on our journey. We also need to plan well in other ways – trying to ensure that we've put into place all the things we might need as we travel together. In order to plan the journey, however, we must have at least a rough idea of our ultimate destination – *where are we heading towards?* The route we choose, and the preparations we make, will depend on this destination. And this is what we mean by vision – it is an idea of the destination that we're heading towards.

It's worth saying that in order to describe this picture of where we might end up, it is, perhaps, inevitable that we will describe some of the journey which we might take to get there. Destinations don't exist in isolation! So this vision document will attempt to outline both a picture of where we might end up (the vision), and some pointers to how we might journey there together (the plan).

Our vision for the future must be based on the truth contained in scripture, and in the truth of where we currently are and where we have been. It will take these, and from them create a picture of where we want to go – a destination worth travelling to. This may be scary – we serve a God of miracles and our vision must reflect this truth, not just our own power and limitations. But it will also be exciting, and my hope and prayer is that you will join with me as we begin to move, in faith, towards it.

Principles from Scripture

Before we begin looking ahead towards our vision, we must do some preparatory work. Our churches are not 'standalone' entities, but part of Christ's Church throughout history. We must, therefore, begin with the truths contained in scripture, and by reminding ourselves of our primary purposes as churches. We will do this by examining a series of key texts, and drawing from them a number of foundational principles which form the calling of all churches, including our own. We will also discover some of the marks of the early church, which are aspirational for us in our own sense of unique calling and vision.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Genesis 12:1-3.

This passage in Genesis 12 is foundational for our identity as the people of God today. Throughout the history of Israel and of the church, God has called people to continue in the mission to which he first called Abram: to go, and to be a blessing to others. Indeed, it can be argued that this is the primary story of scripture: that it is a story of people who were in communion with God, who fell away through sin, and whom God is calling back into unity and blessing with him, primarily through the witness of other people. Abram is promised greatness, but not simply to bless him: no, he will be made great so that he can be a blessing to others. "In you," God promises, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

There are many accounts in scripture of how this calling works out, and the most notable of all, of course, is in Jesus Christ. He is, if you like, the fulfilment of Abram's calling: he goes (becoming incarnate); he is blessed; he is given the name

above all names; he is cursed (and those who curse him are condemned); and all people throughout history are blessed through him.

It's not surprising, then, that this call is strongly echoed in the words Jesus speaks to his disciples in Matthew 28. The 'great commission' is not just for them, but for all disciples of Christ.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20.

The imperative is clear: go! Jesus has all authority, and we are to go and make disciples: baptising them and teaching them Jesus' commands. We are called to go, and to share the good news of God's kingdom, and to share this blessing. To bless others with it, in fact. This, then, is our first foundational principle – the first thing to which all churches are called.

Principle 1:

We are called to go and tell, and make disciples.

If we are to teach people Jesus' commands, it is worth reminding ourselves of just what it is that he commanded! It's also worth remembering that, because Jesus fulfils Abram's call, the commands which we and other obey are designed to bring blessing to the world: they are not legalistic traps to catch us out, but sources of life and joy.

The first command is in the great commission itself: the imperative to go and make disciples. This is a call to every one of us. But there are many other ways in which Jesus teaches and commands his followers.

Indeed, in Matthew 5 we hear that Jesus has not

come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Matthew 5:17-18.

This is powerful, awe-inspiring, and slightly worrying stuff. Perhaps we can be encouraged by Jesus' own summation of the law, which he gave in response to a challenge from a Pharisee:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Matthew 22:37-40.

So we are called to go, to be witnesses of Christ and his Kingdom, to foster disciples and discipleship, and to bless those around us with the love of God enacted through us. No mean task – but it is a task with which we, and all those who went before us, have been trusted.

And central to all of this is the concept of love: God's love for us (without which we would still be living in darkness); and our love for each other and the world. Again, Jesus emphasises this point many times, even praying for his followers that they would (among other things) love each other:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 13:34-35.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

John 17:25-26.

When we think of love, it is easy to think of feelings, or of kindness, or of warm fuzzy encounters between people, but the type of love which Jesus is calling us into is much more than these. It is the same love with which he first loved us: this is how we are called to live, and this is what we are supposed to share with others (both in our actions, and in our instructions). We must never forget that this love is self-sacrificial, self-emptying, and prepared to die in order to bless the other. This is what Jesus did for us, and it is what we are called to do for each other and for the world.

So we reach a second principle, on which all our ideas, hopes, ambitions, and dreams (our vision) must be built. We are called to be a people of love, sharing this love with each other and with the world.

Principle 2:

We are called to love one another, so that the world might know the love of God.

Given that we're discussing the general principles to which all churches are called, it seems wise to take a look at the book of Acts – an account of the first churches, and their efforts to live out the calling which God had given them.

The first thing that we might notice is that Jesus reiterates our first principle, at the very start of the book.

"you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:8.

It is not long after this that we read of this power coming, when the Holy Spirit fills the disciples on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:4 makes it clear that the Spirit's coming isn't simply an act of blessing to the disciples, but an empowering of them too: they are enabled to speak in ways in which those outside can understand. Peter, the man who had denied Christ three times, stands up before this crowd and preaches an astonishing sermon, in which he pulls no punches as he reveals God's love to the world. The authority with which he speaks doesn't come from him, but from God through the Spirit, and this then must be our third guiding principle.

Principle 3:

We are called to be people filled with the Holy Spirit, who equips us to witness and to love.

We now have three key principles through which we can begin to shape our own sense of vision and purpose here in the Benefice. But before we explore this, we would do well to further examine the life of the early church, to discern what made them distinct, and to understand the ways in which we ought to be seeking to live today.

Marks of the early church

Much of the book of Acts is taken up with telling the story of how the early church works out its calling to love and witness, and perhaps the most telling verses are at the end of chapter two.

Although we often exclusively focus on verse 42, the wider text here is worth examining, as it is in many ways a manifesto for the early church. Of course, the early church often got things wrong, and our culture and context are different. But there are certain elements of their lives and behaviours which are worth reflecting on today.

We will identify and discuss 9 categories of the early church's life and behaviour, or *marks*, from the passage in Acts, and will talk about them in the order in which they appear. Please be aware

that this doesn't imply that any of them is more important than the others, or that we should seek to apply them in any particular order – it is simply the way they fall within the text.

And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:40-47.

I want to draw out 9 marks from this passage, which I think were key elements of the early church and which ought still to be key to us as churches today. They are:

1. Witness
2. Teaching
3. Fellowship
4. Food and sacrament
5. Prayer
6. Signs and wonders
7. Sharing in community
8. Praise
9. Growth

We will briefly go through each of these now, but before doing so it's worth noticing that all but two of them (signs and wonders and growth) are things which we can take responsibility for ourselves. This isn't to say that God is ultimately responsible, or that we shouldn't rely on him, but it does highlight the need for us to join in with his work – a need which we must remember as we begin to think about our vision.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

1 Corinthians 3:6.

God calls us to be co-workers in his vineyard: he provides the ground, and the growth, and the resources, but we must labour too – watering and weeding and watching.

Mark 1: Witness

It should be no surprise that the first identifying mark of the early church is that it witnessed to Christ in the world. This, as we have already seen, is one of the principle callings of the church then and now, and so it ought to be in our lifeblood in the same way as it was for the early church.

For the early Christians, everything began with witness, and this was at the heart of their mission. On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes, Peter stands up in front of the gathered crowd and tells them about Jesus. He does not pull any punches: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (2:36). He calls people to repentance and baptism, and we are told that about three thousand people came to faith that day. This is astonishingly powerful, and may seem overwhelming, but all Peter is actually doing is following Jesus’ command, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Remember the words Jesus spoke earlier:

“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 1:8.

Peter is standing as a witness in Jerusalem, and later in Acts we hear how the good news is spread more widely. This is a commission we share in today - we must never forget that our faith is worth sharing, and that, indeed, we *must* share it. We must share it in our Jerusalem (that is, within the church communities, encouraging each other and building each other up in faith); in Judea (that

is, the areas and people on the ‘fringes’ of our churches); in Samaria (that is, the people who are in some ways ‘enemies’ of the church); and to the ends of the earth (in other words, to people who *have not yet heard* about Jesus).

Mark 2: Teaching

The early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (2:42) – and this includes the three thousand who had just come into faith. If we read the rest of Acts, we can see that this teaching is thoroughly grounded in the Old Testament law, and in the insights and encounters that the apostles had of Christ. We are fortunate indeed that our scriptures contain a wealth of material which can teach us, and we are fortunate too that we have a well-established team of leaders and preachers, and life-groups, who are able to offer sound biblical teaching to our churches.

As we move forward, we must remember that we are people of the word, and that study and teaching of scripture is essential to our wellbeing and function as churches and individual Christians.

Mark 3: Fellowship

The early Christians weren’t simply devoted to the apostles’ teaching, but also to fellowship (2:42). This was critical for them, and is critical for us too. On many occasions in Acts, we read of this fellowship beginning to break down – normally where there is disagreement over practice (see, for example, 6:1, 11:1-3; and 15:1). We see this too in the letters to the early churches that form much of the New Testament: for example, Paul writes to the Corinthians:

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.” (1 Corinthians 1:10-11).

Similar appeals can be found throughout the New Testament (see, for example, Galatians 2:11-14; Ephesians 4:2-6; Philippians 2:1-4; Colossians 3:13; 1 Thessalonians 4:10-12 and so on). It is clear that living in unity and fellowship have been difficult for Christian people since the very beginning, and yet it is also true that this ought to be one of our defining marks as churches. We have already mentioned the startling truth that Jesus himself prayed that his followers would live in unity with each other.

As we seek to move forward into the things God has for us, we are all called to strive for unity. This means living for each other, not ourselves:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3-4.

This is simply an outworking of our second foundational principle: that we are called to love one another so that the world might know the love of God, and this emphasis must be present in our sense of vision and purpose as we move forward together.

Mark 4: Food and sacrament

It's worth noting that in our passage from Acts, the breaking of bread is mentioned not once, but twice. We find that, in verse 42, the disciples devote themselves to (among other things) the breaking of bread and prayer, and in verse 46 we hear that they didn't just share time together in the temple, but also ate together in their homes, with "glad and generous hearts."

The language used clearly points to both the sacrament of communion, but also to a wider sense of 'breaking bread' too – that of sharing food with family and friends. The early church needed both, and it ought to be a mark of churches today, too, including ours.

We are already good at the sacramental aspect of this mark of church, with our church communities receiving communion every week within our service pattern. We are, at least on an organised basis, less good at the informal side of 'food fellowship', and as we move forward together we need to seek to foster and encourage it.

Mark 5: Prayer

Prayer goes hand in hand with life as a disciple. Christ himself modelled prayer for us in various ways, notably by giving us the pattern of prayer which we use in church every week that is known as the Lord's Prayer. Throughout scripture, and church history, faithful people have encountered God through prayer, and the world has been changed for the better through those prayers.

We are called to be a people of prayer.

The early church put prayer at the centre of their life together. When Peter and John are ordered not to speak about Jesus, they and the other disciples respond in prayer (4:23ff). When they are choosing an apostle to replace Judas, they don't just leave it to chance or human decision, but place the choice in God's hands through prayer (1:24-25). When Stephen is killed, becoming the first martyr, his final words are a prayer (7:60), and this prayer is answered when Saul encounters Christ and is used powerfully by him.

Prayer on a personal and corporate level is fundamental to the early church, has been fundamental to churches throughout history, and ought to be a keystone in our life together too. Without it, our vision and planning will come to nought. After all,

Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

Psalms 127:1

We encounter God, and are changed by him, and equipped by him, through prayer. This is one of the key ways in which we allow him to be the builder, and in which we become more effective workers for him.

Mark 6: Signs and wonders

We come now to the first mark of the church which can only come from God. We should, of course, be dependent on God in all that we are doing, but the marks we have discussed so far are also achievable – at least on face value – by human endeavour. We can pray more. We can eat together more frequently. We can seek deeper fellowship with one another. We can engage in teaching, both in delivery and in reception. And we can strive to witness. Without God, none of these efforts will be very fruitful, but nonetheless we can still perform them. However, when it comes to signs and wonders, there is nothing we can do without God.

The second point which needs to be addressed before digging more deeply into this particular facet of church life is that there is some debate and disagreement over whether we should expect to see signs and wonders today. This document cannot hope to present a fully argued position – it is outside both our scope and purpose to attempt to do so – but we will briefly outline the position that we are taking, with some scriptural support to show why.

The expectation amongst the early Christians was that God would be active among them, and that they would see his activity in moments of power. So when Peter and John travel to the temple in the days after the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, they were able to speak with confidence to the crippled beggar at the gates. “What I have I give you,” said Peter. “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk.” (Acts 3:6). The passage we are using to uncover the key attributes of the early church makes it clear that one of those attributes

was the manifestation of the miraculous: “many signs and wonders were being done by the apostles” (Acts 2:43). Indeed, Jesus himself makes clear his expectation that his followers will perform signs and wonders:

“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.
If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

John 14:12-14

Jesus promises that his followers will receive power through the Holy Spirit, which will enable them to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8), and part of this witness is the manifestation of his power. On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came, many people were converted by the words of the disciples – and we need to note that those words themselves were a miraculous sign. The disciples spoke in languages which they did not know, as the Spirit gave them the ability (Acts 2:4).

Paul makes it clear that there was an expectation that signs and wonders would be part of the witness of the church. In the list of spiritual gifts we find in 1 Corinthians 12, for example, he states that some will receive the gift of healing, others will speak in various tongues, and still others will perform miracles (1 Corinthians 12:9-10). These gifts are part of a list which is not exhaustive but which certainly indicates an expectation that miraculous ministry will be present in the life of the churches. It also makes it apparent that not everyone will minister through the Spirit in the same way: not everyone, in other words, is called to perform miracles. However, some clearly are.

This leaves us in a difficult position. Although we might occasionally see such signs and wonders today (the miraculous healing of my back some years ago is a personal example of such), the truth is that we don't seem to see the level of such signs that the early church experienced.

There could be any number of reasons for this, and the reality is that we don't know the cause. However, it is clear from scripture that our *expectation* ought to be that we will see signs and wonders in our ministry as churches, and that such signs and wonders are a distinctive mark of being God's people.

Mark 7: Sharing in community

If the previous mark is entirely reliant on God acting in and through us, the next is certainly more dependent on our goodwill and decision.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Acts 2:44-45

This is a tough message, especially in our world where "everyone's home is their castle," and where our understanding is that the things we earn are the things we deserve to keep.

The early Christians seemed to live in a way which was opposed to this: they were completely open to others, utterly interdependent, and tremendously self-giving and generous. If we put it in these terms, we are back in many ways to mark 3: fellowship. In our *relationships* we ought to be open, sharing, self-sacrificing, and generous. But this mark is about a deeper type of relationship. This is about sharing everything we have and are for each other's good. Let us be very clear: this is about sharing our possessions and finances with generosity.

It is worth saying that, as well as living communally in many ways, the early Christians were clearly very much part of their wider culture too. There's no sense in Acts in which people were living in some kind of commune, isolated from the world – in fact, it was just the opposite. But there is certainly a strong emphasis on material generosity – with the early Christians selling

property and sharing the rewards in order to benefit others within their community.

It's worth pausing here to briefly examine the famous episode involving Ananias and Sapphira.

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Acts 5:1-11

Just what is going on here? Is this some kind of warning against attempting to keep anything for oneself? Ought we give away absolutely everything we have in order to benefit the church and others? Should we actually be seeking to live as a commune of people, literally sharing everything together and holding nothing individually at all?

This is clearly a complex passage, with many angles of interpretation and many potential lines of investigation and thought, and certainly there have been interpretations which see the text in this way. However, the simple point is this: that

Ananias and Sapphira were condemned by their lies, *not* by their withholding of profits. The strong implication here is that communal living involves transparency, integrity, and trust, and that breaking this is the sin which condemns Ananias and Sapphira. Peter reminds Ananias that “while it [the field] remained unsold, did it not remain *your own*? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at *your disposal*? . . . You did not *lie* to us, but to God!” (Acts 5:4, emphasis mine). And later, Peter asks Sapphira if the money given to the church was the same as the price paid for the property, and she says yes – again, it isn’t the amount they gave or withheld that was the issue, but rather the deceit which went along with it.

Of course, we have to hold this understanding alongside the truth that there was extraordinary generosity amongst the early Christians. Remember, “they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:45). We must hold onto our possessions and wealth lightly, not deceiving ourselves about where it actually comes from, or about the claim or right we have to it.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

Acts 4:32.

So it is clear that one of the marks of the early church was generosity with goods and money, and a strong sense of commonality and community around this. But the story of Ananias and Sapphira make it clear that having possessions and wealth wasn’t seen as inherently bad or wrong: as long as people were honest and transparent, and *generous*, in their dealings with each other and God.

Our Benefice has been struggling financially for a while. While it is outside the scope of this document to dig too deeply into the causes of this, we must all be challenged by the truth that

financial generosity and sharing is a clear mark of the early church, and ought to be a mark of our churches today too.

Mark 8: Praise

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

Acts 2:46-47.

It should be no surprise that praise has always been a mark of the church, and indeed it remains a mark today. In our churches we have numerous services, offering praise to God in a variety of ways. We have also been working hard to simplify and streamline our pattern of services, in order to make praise and worship of God possible for as many people as we can, in ways which are heartfelt and meaningful and true for all.

This is very good, and we should be encouraged, but we also need to be challenged. In the life of the early church, praise was more than coming together in formal times of worship: rather, it came from the overflow of the life that Christian people were living together. It was natural, spontaneous, and was the outpouring of the community’s heart. Of course, there were times of planned worship and praise: verse 46 indicates that the disciples spent time together in the temple as well as in the home. We must continue to worship God in our planned services – this is very much a mark of the church. But for the early Christians, worship was also something that happened in their homes, and came from their time together (Acts 2:47). Praise was both planned and spontaneous, at different times and in different ways.

And here’s the challenge for many churches today, including our own. One of the marks of the early church is that praise was at the heart and centre of who they were: springing out of their

identity in God and each other, and their glad and generous response to all that God was doing. Praise burst forth from these people without artifice: it was a key way in which they responded to God. For us as Christian communities today, this ought to be a defining characteristic too: we should be praising God in all circumstances and at all times, not just in our Sunday services.

Mark 9: Growth

And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:47.

Like mark 6: signs and wonders, growth is a mark of the church which can only come from God. Despite numerous books, courses, websites, and talks which suggest that all we must do, in order to grow, is follow a particular series of steps, or a particular programme of activities, the Biblical truth stands clear: church growth comes from God alone. The Lord added to their number, and when we see growth today we must always recognise and acknowledge that this comes from God.

The exciting thing is that God wants his church to grow. This mark is very clear in the early church, and has been clear throughout church history, too. In Acts, we read about church growth several times: in our passage from chapter 2; in 5:14 where we hear that the church was growing even though there was fear about being seen to convert; in 6:1 and 7 where we hear that the number was increasing despite active persecution; in 9:31 where we find that the church grew in times of peace as well as hardship, and so on.

We also see this emphasis on growth in the parables of Jesus. In the parable of the sower, we hear that the seed falling on good seed produces a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. In other words, someone hearing the word and understanding it will lead to many others hearing

the word and understanding it (Matthew 13:23). This ties in neatly with our first mark: witness, and our first principle: that we are to go and tell.

Jesus also talks about the kingdom of heaven (of which the church is a sign) being like a mustard seed: tiny, yet it grows enormous and becomes a place of shelter and blessing (Matthew 13:31-32). He goes on to say that the kingdom is like yeast – almost invisible but it makes the loaf grow and grow (Matthew 13:33). In Luke 5, where we hear about Jesus calling his first followers, the physical image that they are shown is an overwhelming catch of fish (Luke 5:6-7). Jesus then says “from now on you will fish for people” (5:10). The implication is clear: the catch of people will mimic the catch of fish, and will be equally overwhelming (and here we come back to our stories in Acts, where Peter begins to see this in action).

The simple truth is that the church began with the ministry of one: Jesus. It was spread through the ministry and witness of a handful of others. And it has grown and grown, and still wants to grow today.

God wants to grow his church.

This is exciting, and it’s encouraging that we are seeing some small signs of this growth already. Although we have seen a number of people moving on, we have also, over the last couple of years, seen a small number of new people committing to regular attendance at various our Sunday services. We have seen a resurgence in the popularity of Messy Church. We have seen new families coming into our toddler groups. And we have seen growth in our seasonal services at Christmas and Easter.

But there is always more to come, and here’s another truth to go alongside the first (that God wants to grow his church). This truth is an uncomfortable one, but we must hear and confront it.

Growth means change, and change is difficult.

We cannot see new people coming in to our community while remaining the same as we currently are. This is simply impossible. New people bring new relationships, needs, ideas, dynamics, and emphases. Moreover, as churches grow, the patterns of ministry must change too: with responsibility for activity and function being given to teams rather than one or two people being responsible.

God wants his church to grow, but here's the thing: we can get in his way. This can lead to hurt and damage to ourselves and each other. We see this in Acts, in several places, where different people struggle with their understanding of what this new community should look like. For example, in chapters 10 and 11, we hear of Peter's vision of unclean animals: and God's clear command that no people group are to be seen as unclean. Peter realises that God is granting life "even to Gentiles", and that he must not "stand in God's way" (Acts 11:17-18). Yet only a little later there is a dispute among the early believers in Judea about whether or not the circumcision rules should still apply. Should Gentiles coming to faith be made to undergo circumcision? In other words, should they become 'like us' – should they be forced to become Jewish in order to become Christian? You can read about this in Acts 15.

It can be uncomfortable when the church grows in ways which we are not familiar with, or which feel as though they are opposed to our understanding of 'how things are.' This is true for all of us, no matter how open or generous we seek to be: all of us have our own preferences and understandings, and all of us need to be challenged by God's generosity, and his openness and desire for all people to come to know him. As our churches grow, and continue to grow, our challenge is to see God at work in this, and (as far as we are able) to 'get out of the way', just as Peter had to in the earliest church.

God wants his church to grow, and will achieve this with or without us. How much better if we can join in with what he's doing, though!

Recap: where are we up to?

We have covered a lot of ground so far, so it's worth pausing to summarise the position. We have identified three principles behind church, and 9 marks, or signs, of healthy churches.

The three **principles** are:

1. We are called to go and tell, and make disciples.
2. We are called to love one another, so that the world might know the love of God.
3. We are called to be people filled with the Holy Spirit, who equips us to witness and to love.

As a reminder, the nine **marks** or identifying signs of church that we have discussed are:

1. Witness
2. Teaching
3. Fellowship
4. Food and sacrament
5. Prayer
6. Signs and wonders
7. Sharing in community
8. Praise
9. Growth

Having spent some considerable time learning from scripture, we must now consider how these principles and marks are already visible within our churches, and how we can seek to make them more so.

A brief caveat

If our vision is to describe a destination which is beyond our own skill and power to reach (and if it doesn't, then we risk leaving God out of the equation all together), then it goes without saying

that we may not hit the exact target that we're aiming at. You will realise as this document unfolds the vision that the notion of water, rivers, and streams is important – and it might be useful to think of our journey together towards the vision as a boat trip. We can plan our destination, and take all the right navigational decisions, but ultimately the wind will blow and the water will run where they will, and we cannot fight against them. Our vision imagines a future based on where we've been, where we are, biblical principles, prayer, and discernment of what God is calling us to: but we may end up in a slightly different place. There is value in aiming, though – because unless we aim for a destination we will stay still, go in circles, or go backwards. This is the destination that we believe God wants us to aim towards – and it may be that there is more clarity to come in future.

Timings

It is important to have a sense of when these things might come to fruition – not to tie ourselves (or God) down, but to give us a right sense of pacing and urgency where it's needed. With this in mind, it seems wise to align ourselves with the wider church, recognising that there within our Deanery and Diocese the year 2025 is being seen as a significant one for a variety of reasons – not least because it is a moment at which very many of the current stipendiary clergy across the country will retire, and so we will see a sudden drop in numbers of full-time clergy². We will, therefore, be looking to be arriving at our next destination (as imagined here) in or around 2025.

The vision in outline

The parish profile, which the PCCs created before Dom's appointment, makes it clear that we want

to be a 'vibrant, effective, and adventurous part of the Church of Christ, becoming the people and church that he wants us to be.' The profile reveals the Benefice's desire to be more worshipful, more servant-hearted, more engaged with our wider communities, and more effective at reaching out in mission (especially to children and families). This passion, and these desires, have significantly informed the creation of this vision document, and much of what follows stems from this beginning.

So without further ado, here is an outline of our Benefice vision for the next six years or so.

1. One stream of our vision is that we will become more focussed on witness, and we expect our churches to grow.
2. One stream of our vision is that we will become more focussed on loving one another, and we expect our actions and behaviour to reflect this.
3. One stream of our vision is that we will become more prayerful, and we expect God to be at work among us, transforming us and our wider communities.
4. One stream of our vision is that we will become more generous with our time, money, and efforts, both within our churches and towards our wider communities.

This is a very broad-brush outline, and there is much more detail to think through, but it is helpful to have a summary so that we can be clear about what we are doing, and where we think God is calling us.

² There was, unfortunately, a period of time during the 80s and 90s where many potential clergy were turned away due to their young age, and we now face the shortfall which this has created.

The vision in detail

Having identified the key points, we must now go into them in more detail, identifying some particular ways in which we believe God is calling us forward. In this section we will discuss each stream in general terms, describing what our church communities might look like in five or six years' time, before going into more detail about how we might get there. In this way, we will be tying together the vision (the destination), and the plan (the possible route).

Stream 1: GROWING.

We will become more focussed on witness, and we expect our churches to grow.

The vision

As we have already pointed out, God wants to grow his church. And so our vision is that, by 2025, the numbers within all our current expressions of church will have grown by 75%. This sounds like a lot, and it is, but it's important that we stretch our faith as we plan our vision. It's also important to note that 75% over 6 years works out at about 10% a year. In other words, if we start with 100 people and add 10% a year, in 6 years' time we would have about 177 people – just over the 75% target we are aiming for.

In practice, this means that in the services where we currently have 40 people, we expect to have grown to 70 people by 2025. This is significant, but not impossible – especially if we can build momentum and expectation about growth.

Growth isn't just about numbers, of course. As followers of Jesus, we are all called to grow and develop in our lives and relationships. One doesn't need to read too deeply in the scriptures to uncover this truth.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being

transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

2 Cor. 3:17-18

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Colossians 3:12-15

There is more to growth than simple numbers, and our vision for the future is that all of us will become more Christ-like in our attitudes, behaviours, and relationships.

The plan: how can we work towards this vision?

How might we aim to achieve this level of numeric and spiritual growth? There are several things we can do which will foster and encourage it.

We need to ensure that all our activity is outward-looking, and seeks to serve those who do not yet belong to the churches.

We have already begun this in a small way with our recent change to the service pattern, seeking to make our Sundays more accessible for all. But there is much more to do – we need to evaluate *everything* we do in the light of our desire to grow numerically and spiritually. If we are doing things which are not focused on growth, perhaps we ought to change those activities or even drop them altogether.

We also need to be much more strategic in our activities. Rather than thinking of each individual task or area of ministry as an isolated area, we need to think in terms of 'streams.' Every task or

ministry must be part of a bigger picture, and we need to be clear about how this bigger picture looks.

In order to begin this evaluative task we will, following the launch of this vision, carry out a complete 'ministry audit.' Through this we will endeavour to ensure that we are using our time, energy, and efforts as well as possible, with the outward-looking focus we need. We expect that, following this process, a number of ministries may need to change, and we could well identify new areas in which we are lacking (for example, we probably need to hold regular evangelistic / nurture courses such as Alpha). Our expectation is that a new leadership structure might emerge from this evaluation, with key leaders responsible for each stream of ministry within the life of the churches.

We also need to consider the impact that our current name has on those who don't yet belong. Our informal name – the Manningtree Benefice – is problematic, as it locates us to a very specific geographical place, and it uses a technical, 'churchy', word which means virtually nothing to many people within our communities. This needs to change, and so over the next few months we will be working together to find a new name for ourselves. One possibility is 'Stourside Parish Churches,' but other suggestions will be considered.

We need to ensure our buildings and virtual spaces are welcoming, and create opportunities for newcomers to engage.

We are fortunate to have several buildings which are, whether we recognise it or not, adverts for our church life and community. At present, we are not capitalising on this opportunity: we do not have a cohesive approach to our notice boards (inside or outside); we tend to accumulate out-of-date or irrelevant publicity material; we do not have a coherent strategy for the spaces which

enables people to access relevant information when they want to; our audio and visual systems are lacking, and so on.

We also lack an overall strategy with our virtual spaces too – while our Facebook page is reasonably popular, we are all but invisible on many other social networks. It would be a very serious mistake to overlook these virtual domains: recent studies have shown that 45% of the entire world's population are active on social media, and in the UK this figure is much higher at 67%. To be clear, there are 45 million people in the UK who regularly access social media – two out of every three in the population. We must engage more effectively in this space.

In order to begin this work, we will form a welcome team, who will be tasked with creating welcoming and accessible spaces (both physical and virtual), and we expect there will be significant changes quite rapidly in our buildings and online presence as a result of this team's formation. One priority which is already clear is that we need to improve the AV aspects of our buildings, and so the PCCs will begin researching and discussing this necessary task in parallel with the welcome team's formation and early work.

We need to ensure that we offer opportunities to learn and grow together for all those who do currently belong.

It is appropriate that we focus on those who do not yet know Jesus – after all, as his followers we are asked to make disciples. But we must not neglect the task of growing ourselves, too: and so we need to ensure that our existing programs of nurture, such as life groups, are well-resourced and offer opportunities for people to grow in their faith. We will, therefore, need to look at our program of occasional teaching through times such as Lent and Christmas, and perhaps offer more regular teaching and fellowship

opportunities. We also need to be more strategic with the teaching we offer on Sundays, ensuring people are given good opportunities to engage with scripture in a more purposeful way. This may mean more 'sermon series', rather than always following the Lectionary.

We need to streamline everything we do, and to create a central hub for the life of our church communities.

For a long time it has been apparent that the lack of a church office is a significant problem – the communication between Dom and Mary, and the office and the wider church, is made far more difficult because of the lack of physical space where we can readily work together.

It is also true to say that, while Lawford Church have been extraordinarily generous in allowing us to share their office space, this arrangement could only ever have been temporary and the time is rapidly approaching when it must come to an end. In the past, the office was located in the Rectory, but this is no longer practicable – partly because the Diocesan regulations make it very clear that this arrangement is not allowed, but more importantly because the Rectory is a family home, not a public office.

If we were able to create a more permanent location for the Benefice office, this would mean that communications would become easier, things would be much less likely to be missed, and there would be a physical space in which we could hold meetings, and where people could easily drop in to see Mary or Dom when needed. It would mean Dom and Mary could work together regularly, too, rather than operating on a pattern of meetings in coffee shops and other locations. Creating an office space is essential as we move forward as churches.

Fortunately, there is an obvious solution. The Mistley Church Hall has a set of rooms at the back which could be readily adapted to become a

modern and functional office. The hall itself could then be used for a variety of church events and functions, as it is intended to be, and it is entirely possible that a window could connect the main hall to the office space, which would allow communication to take place during events and so on. We already use the hall for Messy Church, Tea and Tots, and Tea and Support, and there are many other possibilities for this space. For example, we might start a regular youth group in the hall, or a community café. Of course, we could also offer the hall for hire on such occasions as the church does not require it, and so this building could truly become the hub of our communities.

This is even more true when we consider the current development work in the local area, and the possible (perhaps even likely) future development of housing on the sight of the old Mistley Clinic, and the animal sanctuary opposite the church. The hall could soon be at the centre of a physical community, as well as being at the centre of the life of the Benefice in many ways.

It's important, as we move towards this, to also give weight to the reality that many people spend much time in the virtual space today. With this in mind, we also need to create a more effective online presence, which will allow us both to reach out and to communicate internally. We will, therefore, work to implement a 'church management solution', which will incorporate a website, email management, diary management, and events planning (among other things). This will ultimately make communication much more effective, and will complement the physical space of our new offices in the hall.

We need to resource people more effectively for witness.

We already work to resource people, with regular meetings of our leaders and preachers, regular prayer meetings, and through our Sunday preaching. However, if we are to be more effective

in our witness, we clearly need to be more effective in our program of resourcing people.

We will, therefore, seek to create new forums to train people in leadership, mission, and spirituality. We are already working with the Deanery towards creating a leadership school, which should help with some of this, but we will also seek to add other opportunities for people to gather, pray, learn, and be equipped for mission.

As a prelude to anything else, we will run a 'shape' course at some point over the next year, to encourage people to find a ministry which fits well with who they already are. We will also explore the possibility of beginning a 'ministry academy', which will offer biblical training, support, and encouragement to people on a regular basis.

We need to plant a new church community in the Stour View / Upper Mistley area.

This is a significant piece of work which has been on our hearts and minds for many years. Much energy has already been committed to this in prayer, and over the next few years we will be seeking to turn these prayers into Godly action.

The key to beginning this work is to build a team of people who are willing to get stuck in. There are people of good will who are keen to see our presence in this community grow, and many of those will need to be on this team. We will also need people who are willing to make this new expression of church their 'home', and this means that there will be some hard changes in our existing congregations as some people leave to form a new grouping. There will be an increased need for people to help out in our existing congregations, too, as some of our more active people might be needed elsewhere. In other words, this work will need all of us to join together in prayer and effort, and it is likely to be hard going (especially at the start).

However, this is an essential part of our future life and ministry across the Benefice. At present, we have no significant presence among one of the largest physical groupings of people within our communities, and this needs to change.

We will create new teams for welcome and growth.

To clarify and reiterate what has already been said in this section: we will create a new team who will be responsible for overseeing the welcome in a variety of ways (from improving our buildings to our website to the actual way we greet people when they come in), and we will also create a team who will be responsible for the work on the Stour View estate.

We need to re-evaluate our youth and children's work.

Although we will be carrying out this evaluation as part of our overall mission and ministry audit, it is worth mentioning it as a separate point because of the importance of this particular task.

The Parish profile was very clear that we need to engage more effectively with families and young people, and this work hasn't been easy. We need to re-evaluate our activities, and change or add new elements in order to be more focussed on this essential area of our ministry and life together.

Stream 2: LOVING.

We will become more focussed on loving one another, and we expect our actions and behaviour to reflect this.

The vision

Many church communities have internal divisions and varied positions within their congregations, and this is fine as long as such lines don't become battlefronts! Unfortunately, we have a history of division and difficulty in our churches, often due to changes being implemented and because of

differences of opinion over issues such as service styles. We are already working hard to build greater understanding and unity across our congregations, and it's good to see that some small numerical growth is beginning to occur (a sign of health). However, there is more to be done: both on a corporate and an individual level. Our second Biblical principle, if you remember, is that we are called to love one another, so that the world might know the love of God, and so this is vital to our mission, and ought to be central in our vision.

By 2025, we would like to be a people who are more united in our purposes, more focussed on God, and more loving towards each other and our wider communities. It is hard to write this without it sounding like we're not doing any of this already, and of course we are. But there is more to be done, and there are still divisions and factions within our churches. We need to recognise the importance of love and unity, to repent where we have got it wrong, and to seek again to put God's love into action. We mustn't forget Jesus' commandment:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 13:34-35.

The plan: how can we work towards this vision?

This stream is closely linked with the first – that we will grow – because as we become more loving, we become more Christlike (and therefore we grow as Christians). As we become more loving, we become more attractive to the world, and so we are likely to grow numerically too.

So how might we work together to make our love more real, our unity more solid, and our behaviours more in line with Christ? Here are some possible ways:

We need more social events together.

As we've seen, the early church was marked out by, among other things, its fellowship. People spent time together in worship, prayer, companionship, and support. We already gather regularly for worship and prayer, and many who are in our life group network also find companionship and support there too. But more needs to be done, especially as we consider how we might bridge some of the divisions that have been caused by past hurts.

With this in mind, part of our vision is that we will spend more time together as people. This means time eating together, with regular Benefice meals. It means socialising together, with regular Benefice fun days and family days. It means praying, studying, and worshipping together, with regular Benefice away days and perhaps an annual Benefice weekend away, too (in addition to our existing Sunday programs).

We need to establish a new hospitality team.

In order to begin this work, we need to establish a new 'hospitality team' who will work to make these events happen, and liaise with the office and other leaders in order to communicate them. This team won't necessarily be comprised of the people who run such events, but they will facilitate others to do this. In other words, the team won't necessarily do the cooking – instead, they will raise volunteers to do it!

And this leads to a really important point. Changing the way we spend our lives together will need commitment and dedication from each one of us. If such social events and activities are to work, people need to turn up! Clearly we need to ensure that the timings and regularity of such events are carefully thought through, but we also all need to commit to belonging to one another in this new, deeper, way. This may mean letting go of past hurts.

We need to reinvent our life group network, improving upon what's already there and making it more open and accessible for all.

Our life group network is incredibly valuable. It not only offers a space to resource and encourage people, but it is also vital for support and friendship across our congregations. It would be fantastic if every single person in our churches belonged to a life group – and although this may not be possible, it is a worthwhile thing to aim at.

If this is to happen, we clearly need to rework what's already established. This will need careful thought and planning from the network leaders, and might require the creation of new groups (or the realignment of existing ones). This, in turn, will need careful and delicate handling – the need to make our groups more open is paramount, but it's critical that we don't damage existing relationships and support networks as we do this.

However we do it, it's vital that we have an open and accessible network that people can readily join, in order to gain the support and encouragement that can only be found in such groups.

We need to strengthen and grow our pastoral team.

God is already at work among us, and there are many gifted and willing volunteers who work hard to ensure good pastoral care is delivered sensitively and appropriately across our Benefice. However, we must not stand still. We need to add more people to this team, as well as improving communications within the group and the wider leadership of the church, so that we can ensure that whenever a pastoral need arises it is met swiftly and well.

Stream 3: PRAYING.

We will become more prayerful, and we expect God to be at work among us, transforming us and our wider communities.

The vision

In our theological reflection earlier in this document, we pointed out that prayer is hugely important. It goes hand-in-hand with life as a disciple, and all of us are called to be people of prayer. It is a fundamental aspect of our lives together, and it's worth reminding ourselves here of a verse we mentioned earlier.

Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

Psalm 127:1

In other words, without seeking God, and placing everything that we're doing before him in prayer, we will achieve very little. However, this is not the primary reason for prayer – we are not people 'tapping into' God's power for our own purposes! Rather, we seek God in prayer as a response to him, and a recognition of our need of him.

We already have an emphasis on prayer within the life of our churches, but our vision is that by 2025 prayer will have become even more central to all that we are and do.

The plan: how can we work towards this vision?

Just as our second stream was co-dependent with our first, this stream of our vision is mixed in many ways with the others. Without prayer, we cannot hope to build love and unity. Without prayer we cannot hope to see growth. So how can we work to make prayer more central in our lives, and to make ourselves more reliant on God through it?

We need a more consistent program of prayer events, and we need to spend more time praying together.

In addition to our existing weekly morning and monthly Sunday afternoon prayer meetings, we will be seeking to create new regular and one off prayer events.

Initially, we will create a new monthly evening prayer meeting, which will specifically focus on praying about this vision, and how might implement it most effectively.

We need to grow prayer ministry in our churches.

Our prayer ministry team has shrunk dramatically over the last few years, largely due to changes in the personal circumstances of those who were key members of the team. We need to seek to redress this balance, and will be looking to grow this team and make our prayer ministry more prominent in the church services.

We will also be exploring ways of creating permanent prayer spaces in both church buildings, which can be used on Sundays but also during the week by anyone who wishes to. These spaces will include suggestions for prayer, activities to encourage prayer, and ways of seeking prayer and reporting back on encouraging results. This builds on the existing prayer spaces in each church building: the cross at Mistley and the tree in Bradfield.

We need to encourage people into prayer partnerships.

Many people in our churches are already in prayer triplets, but there are many who don't have regular prayer partners in this way. Part of our teaching on prayer will be to encourage people to form such small groups – not in a 'top down' way, but in an organic fashion. It may be that, as we socialise more together, new

friendships form and become the basis for such prayer. It may be that people are challenged to form a partnership after hearing teaching about prayer, or reading this document, or perhaps encountering some of our new publicity.

However it happens, we need to encourage more prayer partnerships between people in our congregations.

We need to forge a new prayer chain.

At present, our most effective method for seeking wider prayer is to ask Mary or Dom to put an item onto the prayer list in our notice sheet. This works reasonably well, but it is easy to miss people's prayer requests (or to have a request 'fall through the cracks' in some other way).

We need to implement a chain system. Many churches do this, and we need to research the most effective method, but essentially it boils down to this: when someone has a prayer request they can make a phone call, and within a few hours anybody who has signed up to the prayer chain will be contacted and asked to pray. It is, basically, a more effective method of communication! It would be good to create such a chain here, and to ensure that prayer requests are being prayed for as swiftly as possible, and as widely as possible.

We need a small team who will coordinate our prayer life as churches.

It's not only important that prayer requests are swiftly heard, but also that we have a consistent overarching approach to our prayer life. There are times when there will be particular things we ought to be praying about as a Benefice, and there may be times when one or two groups within our communities need to pray about specific things. We clearly need a small team to lead these efforts, to ensure that everything is running smoothly, and to keep oversight on our prayer life.

Stream 4: SERVING.

We will become more generous with our time, money, and efforts, both within our churches and towards our wider communities.

The vision

The early disciples were incredibly generous with their time, money, and effort, and we have discussed already some of the ways in which this generosity manifested itself (notably the 7th, 3rd, and 4th marks – sharing in community, fellowship, and food and sacrament).

It is fantastic that we have many in our congregations who give so selflessly of their efforts, time, and finances. God is already at work! Our vision is that by 2025 we will, as communities, be even more generous with time, money, and effort. Like many churches, we do sometimes struggle with our finances, and at times this can be extremely difficult and worrying. We also struggle from time to time to raise volunteers – although we have a fantastic team of willing people, there are a small number who do an awful lot.

By 2025, we are hoping to see an even more generous spirit among our church family. We will become one church community, united around our faith and common purpose, and giving time, effort, and money as we serve God, each other, and our wider communities.

The plan: how can we work towards this vision?

We need to make it easier for people to volunteer.

At present, we have a mix of rotas and activities, and it's not always clear where or how people can help out – or, indeed, where the needs are. We try to communicate as well as possible, but sometimes things fall through the cracks. Linked to our need to create a church hub, and more effective communications systems, is the need to

make it easier for people to join in – we need good signposting for all our activities, showing what they are, what they involve, and how people can help. We also need to signpost the people to talk to in order to volunteer. This could be done via printed and online material, as well as in notices from the front.

It is vital that we don't think of volunteering as being solely within our church or congregation. There are many local organisations that people already volunteer within, including: The Hub; Acorn Village; Quayside Court; the Food Bank; and Mistletoe Manor. This work is good, but we could do more to raise the profile of the needs of others outside our church communities, and to encourage more people to offer help and support.

We need to be more open about our financial needs as churches.

It's fantastic that God is already answering prayers. Due to an increase in giving, and some generous legacies, both our churches are in a healthier position financially than they were a year or two ago. But there is still a real need to grow financially – especially as we consider the ways in which we might move forward.

Much of this vision concerns new things – a new office space, a new physical community hub, a new expression of church on the Stour View estate, new ministries of hospitality, and so on. This will be costly – not only in terms of time and energy, but also financially. Our giving must increase – it must do so in order for us to stand still, let alone in order for us to grow.

Over the next year, we will be producing a variety of material (including a letter and a website page) which outline our basic costs, current income, and projected results. This will help people to see where their giving is going, and where there is more need.

We need to run more regular stewardship campaigns.

The mini campaign we ran last year was especially successful in Bradfield, and we need to make this a regular feature of our church life and teaching.

We need to make it easier to give.

One of the ways in which our new welcome team can make an early impact is around the area of giving: at the moment it's not easy (especially for newcomers) to find out how they can give regularly to our churches. We can make this easier with publicity materials, and by considering other ways in which people might give (for example, we will explore the possibility of allowing people to set up their giving online).

We need to be more strategic in our work with other churches.

It is fantastic that we already work closely with other churches in our area, through inter-denominational initiatives such as 'Churches Together', and through Anglican structures such as the Deanery. We do not exist in isolation, and we need to continue to work on these links, strengthening them and seeking to build the kingdom with others in our area.

We need a stewardship team to coordinate this work.

As with our life of prayer, we need a small team who will oversee and coordinate this work. They will need to liaise with other teams, ensuring that we use our financial and time resources as well as we possibly can.

Overview: what's next?

There is a lot here to think and pray about, and on the final page we present a simplified outline of all that we've discussed.

The next step is to begin forming the various teams we have discussed in this document. It is hoped that, as these teams are formed, we might create new ways of communicating and working healthily together – with one possibility being that the various team leaders will become part of a bigger team with overall responsibility for the various ministries within our church communities. Identifying leaders for the various areas of ministry and working to build teams will be a priority for the next few months.

In addition to forging new teams, we also need to continue to work on our vision! This document is a working draft, and over the next year we will work together on shaping it, refining it, and making it fit us perfectly. This refinement will happen in a number of ways:

- The PCCs will meet jointly in 2020 to plan and discuss the vision.
- We will have some Benefice days in 2020 to discuss vision, pray together, and work on the details.
- We will use our occasional fifth Sundays together to pray about it.
- After forming the new teams, questionnaires will be available for all members of the church to ask for their feedback (this will be discussed at PCC and on the Benefice days).
- A monthly letter to the churches will be produced (printed copies to be available in the churches) outlining where we are up to, and inviting feedback when appropriate.

In the meantime, the newly formed teams will begin working to implement the vision as it currently stands – putting in some of the foundation work to build upon in future.

Our vision in simple terms.

Imagine a river. Although it looks like one simple thing – a flow of water through the landscape – it is far more complex than this. It has numerous tributaries and streams. There are places where it is wide and slow, marshy, or narrow and fast moving. There is, somewhere, a spring – possibly hidden deep underground. There are almost certainly streams and tributaries underground, too – feeding from or being fed by the river. And the whole thing is moulded around a landscape – it doesn't sit upon it, but is part of it – adjusting its course to fit (and, over time, shaping the landscape itself).

Our life and ministry as churches is a little bit like this river. We have a spring and a source (God's love for us shown in Jesus Christ and expressed through the power of the Holy Spirit). We have a destination (the ultimate expression of which is heaven – God's kingdom made complete in a new creation). We are part of a landscape (the culture and context in which we live and work). We have numerous tributaries and streams (the various ministries, congregations, and expressions of church life).

Our vision needs to outline the shape of this river for the next few years. There are four main streams within it, and numerous tributaries feeding into those streams:

Stream 1: GROWING

One stream of our vision is that we will become more focussed on witness, and we expect our churches to grow.

God wants to grow his church. Our vision is that, by 2025, the numbers within all our current expressions of church will have grown by 75%. This will stretch our faith, but God can do it! If we grow numerically by 10% each year, we will hit this target.

Growth isn't just about numbers, of course. As followers of Jesus, we are all called to grow and develop in our lives and relationships. Our vision for the future is that, as well as growing numerically, all of us will become more Christ-like in our attitudes, behaviours, and relationships.

Some ways in which we might work towards this vision:

- our focus needs to be more outward looking.
- our welcome needs be more visible.
- we need to create opportunities for existing church members to grow spiritually.
- we need to create new structures and streamline what we do, including creating a new office space.
- we need to resource and equip people more effectively.
- we need to plant a new church community in the Stour View / Upper Mistley area.
- we need to establish a welcome team, and a new growth team. Both will be Benefice-wide.
- we need to re-evaluate our youth and children's work.

Stream 2: LOVING

One stream of our vision is that we will become more focussed on loving one another, and we expect our actions and behaviour to reflect this.

By 2025, we want to be a people who are more united in our purposes, more focussed on God, and more loving towards each other and our wider communities. We are already working hard to build greater understanding and unity across our congregations, but there is always more to be done. We all need to recognise the importance of love and unity, to repent where we have got it wrong, and to seek to put God's love into action. Jesus commanded that we "love one another, just as I have loved you." (John 13:34).

Some ways in which we might work towards this vision:

- we need to socialise together more.
- we need to improve our life group network.
- we need to strengthen and grow our pastoral team.
- we need to establish a Benefice-wide hospitality team.

Stream 3: PRAYING

One stream of our vision is that we will become more prayerful, and we expect God to be at work among us, transforming us and our wider communities.

Prayer is hugely important. It goes hand-in-hand with life as a disciple, and all of us are called to be people of prayer. It is a fundamental aspect of our lives together. Without seeking God, and placing everything that we're doing before him in prayer, we will achieve very little. However, this is not the primary reason for prayer – we are not people 'tapping into' God's power for our own purposes! Rather, we seek God in prayer as a response to him, and a recognition of our need of him.

We already have an emphasis on prayer within the life of our churches, but our vision is that by 2025 prayer will have become even more central to all that we are and do.

Some ways in which we might work towards this vision:

- we need to pray together more frequently.
- we need to improve our prayer ministry.
- we need to encourage prayer partnerships.
- we need to create a new prayer chain.
- we need to establish a Benefice-wide prayer team.

Stream 4: SERVING

One stream of our vision is that we will become more generous with our time, money, and efforts, both within our churches and towards our wider communities.

It is fantastic that we have many in our congregations who give so selflessly of their efforts, time, and finances. God is already at work! Our vision is that by 2025 we will, as communities, be even more generous with time, money, and effort.

We will become one church community, united around our faith and common purpose, and giving time, effort, and money as we serve God, each other, and our wider communities.

Some ways in which we might work towards this vision:

- we need to make it easier for people to volunteer
- we need to be more open about the needs of the churches.
- we need to run stewardship campaigns regularly.
- we need to make it easier to give.
- we need to be more strategic in our work with other churches.
- we need to establish a Benefice-wide stewardship team.