

A vision for our future



Short 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 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.

The document you are reading is a short version of a much longer work, which contains theological reflection, and much more detail of the vision (and in particular, more detailed plans for how we might reach our goal). The longer document is available in church, and copies can be printed or emailed upon request.

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).

A vision for our future.

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.