



# North Bedford Church Partnership Review St Mark's and Putnoe Heights Church



## 1. Where have we come from?

### Which Churches or congregations have made us?

In 1972 the decision was taken to make North Brickhill and Putnoe an Area of Ecumenical Experiment. A Partnership exists between the Church of England and the Methodist Church at both St Mark's Church and Putnoe Heights Church, Bedford. They function as two sister churches, each one being effectively a Local Ecumenical Partnership in their own right.

### How are our churches organised, what is their form of governance and what ministers lay or ordained serve them?

This is a mature ecumenical partnership, which acts as a resource and encouragement to other churches. Friendships and co-operation exists between the two churches at many different levels, providing valuable resources and support. The two churches share many things, including Ministers, joint services, a weekly publication of Partnership News and enjoyable social events. Each church values the presence of strong lay leadership provided through a Leadership Team. Seven people at each church share the duties and legal responsibilities normally undertaken by Anglican Churchwardens and Methodist Stewards. A Partnership Council is formed from the two Leadership Teams and others, which exercises leadership over the two churches and is legally constituted to act as the Parochial Church Council, usual attendance at Partnership Council is 20 members. A Church Council operates at each church and deals with matters relating specifically to either church, usual attendance at Putnoe Heights 25 members and at St Mark's Church 15 members.

---

## 2. What is it like to live in an LEP?

### How aware are the congregations that we are a part of an LEP?

Many of those people responsible for the development and growth of the Partnership are still active in the churches. There is a good involvement of members in the life of the wider denominational churches with participation in the Circuit, Deanery District and Diocese. A member of the Partnership serves as Circuit Treasurer, and Methodist Ecumenical Officer. For some of those who are new members to the Partnership, denominational labels are far less significant and the covenant proposal has been welcomed as a signal that our two denominations are putting past differences behind them. After meeting with members of the churches, The Reverend Colin Davey has reflected upon the Partnership and made the following extremely helpful observation

*'The Partnership has moved away from a joining together of two distinct identities - even if a very few might still think St Mark's is more Anglican than Methodist - to a sense of an 'extended Christian identity', in which members from many more than these two traditions simply see themselves as members of a local Christian Church. The Partnership is also fully aware that it is not a 'third denomination' - and it ensures this by consciously maintaining links with the two church traditions from which it was formed.'*

### How is our LEP's commitment to sharing our resources for ecumenical mission, ministry and witness together being affirmed and strengthened?

Our Partnership has developed over a considerable period of time and is viewed by others<sup>1</sup>as a

good model of ecumenical practice which has been used elsewhere. It has therefore contributed to many other churches considering ecumenical progress. Our own ministers have given considerable advice and met with other churches. Visitors from other churches attend the Partnership to become aware of the possibilities. The patterns of worship and structures of church government have been used as models or copied by other churches. We have been pleased to welcome students, often involved in ministerial training, who have come for experience of the ecumenical church environment.

### **What contact do we have with other LEP's ?**

The Partnership has close links with Oakley which is in the same Circuit.

---

### **3. What are our joint activities?**

#### **When the LEP set up**

The LEP had denominational segregation in government and alternating denominational patterns of worship. However the two denominations have been engaged upon a journey which has brought them ever closer. Almost all denominational apartheid was brought to an end about 12 years ago. The only existing barrier which remains is the prevention of the Methodist Ministers to conduct Anglican weddings, prohibited by state law.

#### **Now & Planned for the future?**

The concept of joint activities has now been superseded and renders the following two questions redundant.

---

### **4. What is the composition of our worshipping community?**

#### **When the LEP was set up**

The LEP was largely drawn from people identified specifically as Methodist or Anglican.

#### **Now**

Our present congregations retain some of the original membership, however we have been strengthened by a much greater mix of denominations. We now have people drawn from all the major Christian denominations. The congregations of each of our churches are drawn mainly from the vicinity of each church and are representative of our communities rather than previous denominational affiliation. We also welcome the Bibleway and the Lutheran Church who use the church at Putnoe for their own services.

#### **Our future expectations**

We would expect current trends to continue, especially as people appear to be demonstrating less denominational concern year on year.

---

### **5. How has our pattern of worship developed?**

#### **The pattern at the start**

Our pattern of worship was once more denomination specific, using liturgy entirely drawn from

either of the denominational parents. This would have been led by a person clearly representing either denomination.

### **What it is now**

The times of the morning services have been arranged to enable the attendance of all ministers at both churches on a weekly basis and provide the context for sustained continuity and growth. Preaching is shared among the ministerial team and the contribution of Methodist Local Preachers and visitors from our parent and other denominations is welcomed. The ethos is open and accepting, yet the ministry is focused with a clear traditional understanding of the Christian message presented in a non-threatening environment. The usual Sunday attendance at St Mark's is about 100 adults and at Putnoe 140 adults. Services continue to attract new visitors and fortunately, we have been able to retain a sufficient new membership to replace members of our congregation who leave for any reason. Due to the age of the congregations there is a rising death rate among members, some of whom have been pivotal in the contribution over many years. We are able to report increased attendance at all of our significant services over the past year. St Mark's Church has recognised increased church attendance over the past year.

Our worship follows the seasons of the Christians year and includes significant services from each denomination such as the Methodist Covenant Service, which has been modified to include an invitation for the renewal of baptism vows.

We are particularly pleased to report the positive response to mid-week worship which has been started at both churches at 12 noon on Monday and Thursday. This service called Storybox is attracting parents, carers and children to an hour of Bible stories, singing and activities. The last service at Putnoe Heights Church reported over 70 parents and children. The success of this new style of service has been further enhanced by the new discussion group 'God-Talk' which has been formed from some of the young parents after the service. Services at our churches are not governed along denominational lines. The incorporation of our two traditions has been an inevitable and irreversible result of our marriage process. The openness of our Partnership to change and new experiences has also seen the incorporation of many other traditions. Our services, such as those of Holy Communion, Covenant and Renewal of Baptism Vows, Morning Worship and Commemoration of the Faithful Departed, all demonstrate the richness of different ecumenical influences. Our worship seeks to combine traditional excellence as well as the best of more modern influences. A recent development has been the introduction of a special service for the Renewal of Marriage vows. This has proved to be much appreciated

There is active lay involvement by our competent and committed congregations in all areas of church life, including worship. Rotas operate at each church which seek to ensure that all Bible Readings, all intercessions and regular preaching is carried out by the laity.

### **What developments are planned?**

Our worship is constantly reviewed and new liturgical material is introduced on a regular basis. There is perhaps some new development expected in family worship services as we seek to integrate the young people at Putnoe who attended Storybox+. This midweek youth group will prepare drama and other contributions especially for the Family Worship and we have written new liturgy to assist this process. The increase in Sunday School attendance at Putnoe Heights Church will also hopefully provide similar opportunities.

## **6. How is our LEP financed? When it was set up and now**

### **Are any changes envisaged?**

Each church manages its own finances and contributes towards the Anglican quota and Methodist Assessment. Neither church has any separate denominational funds.

---

## **7. What impact does our LEP have on the community?**

### **When it was set up**

Our churches have always had a concern for their involvement in the community. From the outset there was at each centre a desire to establish community groups. This outward approach to the community has been combined with a tolerant caring attitude which has enabled the churches to be at the forefront of community provision.

### **Now**

An essential element of the life of both churches is the implementation of the Church Mission Policy to develop the two churches as community centres. Both churches have excellent updated facilities to support this policy. At present over 45 charities and community groups operate from each church centre. We are pleased to provide facilities for day care for the learning disabled on three days each week, in addition to many support groups for the most vulnerable members of society.

From Easter of this year we have employed an additional Centre Manager responsible for Putnoe Heights Church Community Centre. Having a manager at each Centre will provide much greater flexibility and coverage of community activities. There is also an army of excellent volunteers supporting the work of the centres and general church administration. The support of the community for our Centres is recognised in the fact that this year there were no objections to planning permission for a large building extension to be constructed at St Mark's. St Mark's and Putnoe Heights are the two busiest community Centres in Bedfordshire. The Community Centres are operated by Management Teams, chaired by the Ministers, who ensure compliance of the Centres with the increasing expectations of Health and Safety, safeguarding and other legislation. Each Centre complies with the requirements expected for the award of an Entertainment Licence and these have been held for ten years without objection to renewal.

Last year one of our flagship projects, GOLD (Growing to Overcome Learning Disabilities), a group started by the St Etheldredas Trust, was closed by the trustees due to lack of finance. We are pleased to report that St Mark's has now successfully bid for £160,000 of European Social Fund money to start a new group called 'Clubhouse.' This group will care for people with learning difficulties, but also take new initiatives to enable clients to access opportunities for employment. The group will begin on March 1 and we have already employed five new members of staff for the project.

### **Plans for the future.**

We expect to continue to grow our community work at both churches in spite of a challenging environment. There will be increased expectations placed upon paid and volunteer staff to meet more stringent regulations in areas such as Health and Safety and Safeguarding issues. Funding opportunities will be more difficult to access, making resources more scarce. We currently employ over 30 people, this will place more demands upon administrative staff, many of whom are volunteers, and a greater financial burden the Partnership. There will need to be close scrutiny of financial provision to protect the church councils from employment costs in the event of redundancies, sickness, pregnancy etc. The new employment environment in which we operate has necessitated a high level of professionalism for our church financial teams.

This trend will continue and we must constantly 'raise our game' if we are to be able to effectively compete in providing community services in a market environment.

---

## **8. How does our LEP relate to the County body?**

### **When it was set up ,**

The Partnership has always provided representation and recognised its accountability to the County Ecumenical Committee.

### **Now & what we would like in the future.**

At present a member of St Mark's Church, Mr John Stubbs, is Methodist Ecumenical Officer. One of our ministers, The Reverend Charles Royden, has been a member of the committee for ten years. The Partnership has provided input and delivered presentations to County Ecumenical gatherings. We continue to recognise the valuable input of the County Body.

---

## **9. Where are we going?**

What plans are there for the development of our LEP, including ministry and buildings?

### **Buildings**

#### **St Mark's**

Last year we completed the provision of a new office suite built into the roof space at St Mark's Church. It offers users computer facilities with internet and use of a telephone. The suite was completed in March 2004 and is fully paid for.

St Mark's Church Council has also received planning permission for a new building on site to serve as a centre for charities working with disabilities. Fundraising is progressing to raise £200,000 required to complete the project, we currently have about £50,000 promised or raised. The necessity to raise such a considerable amount of money has provided an opportunity for an extensive programme of social events. We have held such events as a fun run, swimathon, wine tasting evening, Italian evening, Spanish evening and the ever popular car boot sales on every Bank Holiday Monday. These social activities have a much wider benefit for church friendship building than the more obvious generation of cash. We already have planned an auction of promises, another fun run and an American evening.

St Mark's has also been granted permission to extend the Garden of Remembrance into an adjoining playground. Plans are being drawn up for extensive landscaping and remodelling to allow the Garden to have access from the front of the building and additional burial space.

#### **Putnoe Heights Church**

We have recently opened a new chapel inside the Centre to provide a place of peace and prayer in the busy community centre environment. Putnoe Heights Church has also been conducting a complete inspection of the premises and used the quinquennial report to ensure that the building is maintained in first class condition. There are plans for the introduction of air conditioning to the main worship area in the near future.

At Putnoe we face specific pressures on the site for car-parking space and from Pre-school, which needs more space to provide for expanding demand.

Future development may include exploring our relationship with the Bibleway and German Lutheran congregations which use our church buildings; should this be one of Landlord/ Tenant or that of Partners, and if so, on what basis?

## **Ministry**

We are fortunate to have the wide involvement of people from many different Christian backgrounds, both ordained and lay. It is expected that our willingness to share ministerial responsibility will continue and develop.

The involvement of lay people, including Methodist Local Preachers, is critical and crucial to the nature of the Partnership. The laity have a major influence in the worship, pastoral and mission life of the church. Sunday worship relies heavily on rotas in which the laity prepare for worship, conduct intercessions, and preach. Our Pastoral Support Group are responsible for the ongoing care of families and visiting the bereaved. Without our hundreds of volunteers our community centres would be unable to operate.

It is our expectation that the significant contribution of our congregations will become even more vital in the future.

Our Ministers are also involved in a wide variety of different types of ministry outside the parish. The Reverend Dr Sam Cappleman exercises a ministry in his workplace. The Reverend Dr Joan Crossley has a Diocesan role as a vocations advisor. The Reverend Neil Bramble-Chapman is chaplain to Bedford Hospital and also to St John's Hospice, Moggerhanger.

## **How will the integrity of our constituent denominations be maintained?**

Our ministers and lay members of our churches are faithful in their responsible participation in denominational affairs. We recognise and uphold the importance of representation and full involvement in the Deanery and Circuit. Likewise we are pleased to welcome the involvement of the denominations in our church life. This is demonstrated in such matters as the welcoming of Methodist Local Preachers to our worship.

## **What are the greatest joys, and misunderstandings in our developing LEP?**

Previously there has been misunderstanding from people outside our churches, who have been suspicious of ecumenism and the closeness of our unity with and between the denominations. This has been considerably alleviated by the recent Anglican Methodist Covenant developments, which has made legitimate the union which we have had for so many years.

The joys of being in our Partnership far outweigh any negatives. We are much more able to draw upon the best practice of other churches, without any feeling of denominational disloyalty. Belonging to our parent denominations, whilst enjoying our own special relationship, has enabled us to recognise the false suspicions and erroneous assumptions made by Christians who have not moved beyond narrow denominational boundaries to enjoy the fruits of sharing.

---

## **10. For the further progress of the LEP, what are our strengths?**

### **Worship**

The worship in our Partnership has evolved in a way which forms a balance between the modern and the traditional. The ethos is relaxed yet dignified and respectful, this distinguishable formula meets the needs of our congregations. Our worship retains an integrity of which we are proud, specifically the tendency for worship to become entertainment has been avoided. The ethos of our worship mirrors the churches themselves in being, accessible open and welcoming.

Our worship will continue to draw upon the very best traditional sources, whilst always remaining open to new insights. We are fortunate that our congregations are always open to experience new developments. The structure of our worship is appreciated by the many visitors we have in our services, especially baptism and all age worship.

## **Website**

The partnership seeks to be at the forefront of information and communication technology and has an award winning website [WWW.ThisChurch.com](http://WWW.ThisChurch.com). The website has dramatically increased its audience over the past year and now receives over 12,000 visits per month from people in countries all over the world. Practically every leaflet, policy or document produced in our churches may be found on the website, including weekly sermons and bible notes archived over the last five years.

## **Homegroups**

There is a network of four homegroups in the Partnership providing valuable Christian support and encouragement. These groups meet frequently and plan programmes incorporating Christian teaching and discussion.

Each year our Lent groups are supplemented by a series of Christian teaching sessions, which we now conduct in Putnoe Heights Church due to the increasing numbers who attend. The popularity of these evenings has led to a request for more Christian teaching and we have also introduced an Advent Course. This course and our current Lent Course usually attract about 100 people at each evening. Subjects covered have included, 'Understanding the Bible, Christian ethics, hymnody and worship.

## **Pastoral Support**

A trained Pastoral Support Team operates throughout the churches and wider parish, offering pastoral support. The Team assists the Ministers by visiting every family for whom a funeral service is conducted, the provide home communion visits, and ongoing support to church members at times of sickness either at home, hospital or in residential care.

There are currently three residential homes for the elderly in the parish area to which members of the churches either make visits or conduct services.

## **Leadership Teams**

Some members of our congregation have highlighted our management structure as being a particular strength. In the Leadership Team the clergy and laity share the leadership of the church, the model is extremely collaborative and manages to take church forward by consensus. This has resulted in a decision making system which provides an unusual degree of harmony. Decisions are discussed and owned across the church, enabling a solid endorsement of most aspects of church life. As an example there has not been a divided vote at St Mark's Church Council for over ten years. Usually there is unanimity for decisions, without such agreement the proposal is delayed until an agreement is forthcoming. This leadership by consensus have evidently not produced any stagnation in the decision making process. Indeed it might be argued that such respect for all participants has allowed a level of trust to develop which allowed us to move forward more confidently and quickly.

---

## **11. What is hindering our development?**

It has been a particular encouragement this year to witness the success of the covenant between our two parent denominations. Churches like ours feel a sense of achievement and vindication, that after years of pioneering ecumenism between our two churches we are finally seeing progress beyond the local level.

## **Pastoral Care.**

The congregations at St Mark's Church have the typical elderly age profile of many of our churches. As the members grow more elderly there will be increasing issues of ensuring satisfactory pastoral care, either at home or residential establishments. There will also be an

important challenge to continue to attract members to our churches, who most probably will themselves be more senior members of the community.

### **Ecumenical Vision.**

It will be important for the Partnership to continue to encourage our parent denominations as they seek to secure the vision of a national covenant and growing unity. We have been active in trying to draw together the functions of our Deanery and Circuit, it would be a significant achievement if meaningful unity were to be accomplished at that level in Bedford. The first joint meeting of Deanery and Circuit has now taken place.

### **Financial stability.**

The Partnership has to raise over £70,000 per annum to cover the cost of payments to our denomination in the current financial year. This amount must continue to be increased by 15% per annum over the next five years if we are to meet our financial commitments. The commitment and financial generosity of our congregations is undoubtedly extraordinary and has been demonstrated on many occasions, as they have achieved financial targets for a wide range of projects and specific mission projects. We have been pleased at the willingness of our congregations to assist us by making standing orders for giving, and gift aiding any contributions. We recognise that this new financial expectation is nevertheless perhaps the most challenging situation which our churches have ever faced.

### **Conclusion**

Looking forward we are excited and encouraged by the opportunities and challenges presented in our Partnership. Our development over the last 30 years has been a journey of discovery, service and worship, which has led us into many different areas of ministry and social involvement. We trust in God that he will continue to lead us forward into the next 30 years with the vision and clarity which has been evident in the past.

*This report has been completed in consultation with the Leadership Teams. Contributions have been invited and received from members of the congregation.*