

The Benefice of Leadon Vale

What I have noticed...

I am very grateful for the welcome and hospitality that I have received both in the churches and in various homes and hostelrys of Leadon Vale. People have been unfailingly courteous and generous with their time.

These are observations – and some questions – that I am sharing as a way of reflecting back and as a basis for further work together.

The total population in the Benefice is around 3,500. Dymock parish is the largest with 1,300, followed by Redmarley with 750 and Bromesberrow with 500, most of whom are in Bromesberrow Heath. With the exceptions of Dymock and Redmarley, the location of the church buildings does not correspond to the localities where people live. There are significant hamlets – Kempley Green, Brand Green, Bottloes Green/The Scarr, Bromesberrow Heath, Upleadon where there is no church building. Ethnically Leadon Vale is monochrome – although I have been glad to find quite a few Welsh folk!

Rural life is changing – it is always changing. Farms in the Benefice are now larger economic units that are highly mechanized and use contract labour. Buildings formerly linked with agriculture (cottages, barns etc) have been converted for residential use, attracting some who are retired, others who commute and some who want a 'place in the country'. There is very little affordable housing and very little social housing. In the Benefice there are two pubs – one which is owned by the community in Dymock and another in Redmarley on the main A417. There is one shop in Bromesberrow Heath, which is community-owned and run by volunteers. So many other local facilities have closed in recent memory.

There are four church primary schools; they attract a number of pupils not only from within the Benefice but also from Newent and Ledbury.

There are a number of Village/Church Halls where there are questions about the future, especially relating to the Albemarle agreement. In some places there is some friction over the future of Halls.

Leadon Vale is greatly blessed both in terms of a historic heritage – eg. Dymock poets, St Mary's Kempley, Dick Whittington, Mormons and Chartists for starters – and also in terms of natural beauty.

I am glad to acknowledge a deep spirituality and commitment to Jesus Christ. I have seen an eagerness or at least a willingness to go deeper.

Taken as a whole Leadon Vale is greatly blessed in terms of able and willing musicians, both singers and organists.

I have noticed a passionate concern to maintain church buildings. Some have had significant expenditure recently; others face this. I was told on numerous occasions that the church buildings are valued by the community. People see them as an 'assurance of well-being' and want them preserved to be available for their life events. Somehow the buildings have become representative and symbolic of the community. However, the changing nature of rural society means that this visceral/sentimental attachment to the church building cannot be assumed. In some parishes there was talk of 'us and them'.

I am very grateful for the ministry of retired clerics and Readers, noting their voluntary contributions and recognising that this is not a sustainable basis for the future. I note that the Revd John and Sandra Furst are moving from the area shortly. More positively a retired priest is shortly moving in to Redmarley.

There is considerable disparity between parishes in terms of finances – some have substantial reserves or access to Trust Funds; whereas others struggle. This is a contributory factor to a sense of parochial defensiveness.

I was struck by the dedication of 17 Wardens across nine parishes. But I noted that many – as well as many PCC members and regular worshippers and those active in the churches – are aged over 70, and some are facing significant health challenges. The age profile is a significant challenge. I am only too aware that with age comes decreasing energy and flexibility of mind to engage with change and transition.

I met very few who are involved with the churches who have been in Leadon Vale for less than 10 years.

A number of community and social events that were started by the churches are now run in closer partnership with the local community – eg the Daffodil weeks and weekends. These are seen as fund-raising events rather than mission opportunities. There is little energy/time to offer hospitality and run church events over the same time.

Churchmanship in the Benefice is fairly uniform with small variations.

I have been to three Benefice services and I note that the numbers are fewer than the aggregate of those who worship in the individual churches in the rest of the month. On the other hand there is a great sense of fellowship and worship in the Benefice services.

A number of committed Christians, including some younger families, from Leadon Vale worship outside the parishes. Within the Benefice there is only Western Way Fellowship in Dymock as a non-Anglican place of worship. Relationships with this Fellowship are good.

There are two Parish magazines – one monthly and one bi-monthly. This inevitably has implications both for communication and for any sense of identity as 'Leadon Vale'.

Communication is an issue where not all Wardens are on diocesan database, nor on email. There are challenges both between churches and within the parishes. The 'Diocese' is generally seen as remote; the Deanery has hardly been mentioned. As far as I have been able to tell, LIFE, the diocesan vision has made very little impact or engaged attention and enthusiasm.

The Benefice Office is well equipped and I am grateful for Chrissie's work there, but it remains an under-used resource needing some greater clarity of purpose.

A significant number of Wardens and worshippers live outside the Benefice, especially in Newent and Ledbury, but they have historic and friendship connections.

The maintenance of Churchyards can be contentious with discussions about presenting as a lawn or area for wildlife and conservation...

There is a strategy for engagement with schools with a wonderful commitment by some in terms of collective worship, after-school club and Open the Book. Alongside this is a small but committed engagement with children in Oxenhall. While acknowledging this the age profile of those engaged practically in this work is fairly typical of the churches (see above!).

The model of mission in Leadon Vale is one of recruitment only; there is the feeling that if only we can get people to come to church, somehow they will 'catch it'. But there is also some frustration at not knowing quite how to make this work. And it is not really working.

Few people lead Intercessions in church and few are engaged in what we could identify as church ministries – assisting in Holy Communion, for instance.

With pastoral care, I have noted with appreciation the concern for one another in the church families, but there is no system for pastoral care in terms of identifying needs and opportunities. It is all *ad hoc* and works to some extent. I note with gratitude the willingness of some to take Holy Communion to the housebound and also engage in the residential care homes and Stepping Stones (Pfera Hall).

Parish Share is a focus for disagreement with difficult decisions postponed. This has become something of a lightning-rod for disagreements and relationship issues. It is clearly not an issue that can be dealt with in isolation, although it is currently a matter demanding urgent attention.

Safeguarding – Leadon Vale has two safeguarding officers, but I am not sure that Safeguarding has greatly shaped our culture.

I notice that we tend to ask the question of how we can get the community to support us rather than the question of what we can do for the community.

I discern – more clearly in some places than others to be sure – a high resistance to significant change.

Final questions for reflections –

- Is this a recognisable picture of Leadon Vale?
- What is the main driver in our church life?
- Is it our priority to buttress weakness or to build on strength?
- What should we be working on over the next 3/6 months?

And a suggestion –

This is God's work not ours, and so I suggest this feeds directly into a Benefice wide evening for prayer and reflection and then a monthly prayer meeting –with dedicated and concerted prayer for the future. The first meeting to discuss this will be on September 24th at 7.30 pm. in Dymock Church. ALL ARE INVITED AND WELCOME.

Tudor Griffiths
3rd September 2018