



The Venta group of churches

Arminghall, Caistor St Edmund, Stoke Holy Cross and Dunston

Celebrating and Reviewing 2023

For the annual meetings in Spring 2024

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**The following reports were available at the time of printing,
but others may follow at the Annual Meetings.**

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1. The year in overview

Vicar's report

It's been a fantastic year in the life of our churches. The sense of encouragement has been building over the last few years, and this really started to come to fruition over the course of 2023.

Much of that was not the fruit of massive change, but simply of lots of obedience in the same direction over a number of years. Lots of people just kept doing the great things they have been doing, in some cases for ages. People kept praying. Six days a week, in some way, we are meeting to pray, and that does something. PCCs kept meeting. Buildings were cleaned and churchyards were tidied. Established groups like Embers and the Dementia Support Group and Home groups and Sparklers kept meeting. All of these things and more happened through the faithfulness of lots of different people.

But there were some great steps forward as well. On Thursday mornings, as we have gathered fortnightly for coffee and monthly for communion, more and more people are coming, and the possibilities of making disciples are growing. On Sunday afternoons, especially as the autumn progressed, we were seeing more and more people coming to join us at All Invited. By the end of the year, new people were coming almost every week, and we had a core of 6 families we could pretty much rely on to make an appearance. In Caistor, there was encouragement on two fronts, as we began to meet with the Norfolk Archaeological Trust to make plans to develop the building for shared use, and we saw growth in the community walks and gatherings we facilitated, which followed on from the visits Jani and Lia paid to residents at the end of the pandemic.

We have benefited hugely from the hard work of many, including our assistant minister Lyn, our wardens and PCCs, teams of people who provide hours of practical support in halls, buildings, churchyards and elsewhere, and it has also been a joy to welcome Kirsty Long who moved to a shared curacy between us and the Poringland churches in June, together with her husband Stuart and daughter Hannah, not to mention the frequent visits from her older children and their partners.

The year started well with a focus on how Christians care for the environment as part of their discipleship, with visits from the Bishop of Norwich, who is lead bishop for the environment in the Church of England, and then from two old friends of mine: Tim Howles, a minister and university lecturer with an interest in theology and the environment; and Steve Smith, a climate scientist and former government adviser on climate change. In the early months of 2023 Annie Leathers stepped down as warden at Arminghall after many years of faithful service.

At the beginning of February we were pleased to welcome Mark Aldridge, who came to do a leadership morning for us and other local church leaders. We began Lent with an Ash Wednesday evening at the Vicarage. Towards the end of February Lyn, Cathryn and I spent time in Harrogate for the New Wine Leaders' Conference, which is always such a refreshing and encouraging time. The beginning of March brought the first group of people together to do a big clear-up of the churchyard at Caistor. Some Lent Saturday mornings followed along.

April brought Easter and fantastic celebrations around the churches, including something every day from Thursday to Sunday. April was also the month we finally really began to get on top of the bat problem at Dunston, with the scaffolding going up and the mitigation works in the building beginning. We had our now familiar fantastic St George's Day celebration at Arminghall to round off the month, before the start of May brought not only a prayer space in school, but a fantastic coronation picnic on the field at Stoke. Later in the month, around Ascension Day, a busy week brought the Caistor litter pick and BBQ, an outdoor service in Dunston, 24 hours of

prayer in the Church Hall, and the first of a series of after school clubs ahead of the Holiday Club at the end of term.

June was a quieter month by the year's busy standards, but the pace picked up again in July with Kirsty's ordination at the beginning of the month, and a great Vicarage BBQ in the afternoon including the baptisms of two of our young people. We started to get busy with cream teas at Caistor again, which went on into August, and ran another brilliant Holiday Club at the school before the New Wine summer gathering was upon us again.

Some things happen with a lot of fanfare, and others more quietly, and I was personally really encouraged that after an extended Covid break, we were able to offer a bereavement service for the first time in years, this time at Caistor on a Sunday afternoon in September. Later in the month we had a fantastic Harvest celebration at Arminghall, with lots of families from All Invited joining some village regulars in the churchyard and church building. Just the week after, it was lovely to be back in the building at Dunston again for a special service focused on the 250th anniversary of the firm favourite hymn, Amazing Grace.

My diary from last year says the rest of October was quiet – not sure I can believe that! – before we got into the busy season of Light Parties and Remembrance. Remembrance weekend this year included having the building open at Stoke to celebrate the newly decorated building and rehung war memorials.

By now the Christmas preparations were in full swing, with our choir singing away, and our Embers musicians practising their songs. They, and all of you, did us proud at great events around the villages in the weeks leading up to Christmas, and culminating in a fantastic Christmas "weekend" with community carols around Stoke, the Dunston service, families around the crib at Stoke, midnight at Caistor, and then Stoke again in the morning. On the Thursday night it was a special privilege to celebrate the opening of our Pantry foodbank, very kindly built for us by the Poringland Women's Shed.

Like every year, we have celebrated wonderful weddings and baptisms around our churches, but also said goodbye to some, including a few precious brothers and sisters from our church communities. In 2023 we said goodbye in particular to Jenny Pitchford from Caistor St Edmund, and David Carrington from Stoke Holy Cross. We continue to want to want to be the churches in our community for our community at every stage of life, and whatever is going on for them, and those occasions are all part of that.

What a year we've had. For all of it, for all of you, thank you. We have done some brilliant things together, all to the glory of God, and we hope and pray for more and more in 2024.

Rob Baker
Vicar of the Venta group of churches

Churchwardens' reports

Caistor St Edmund

At Caistor Church we have continued to maintain the regular pattern of two services a month: Praise and Worship the first Sunday and Holy Communion the third Sunday both at 9.30am. We thank all the Leaders and we greatly appreciate the input by Brian Day who has led all the Praise and Worship services. Also thanks to Antony Jarrold who regularly plays the organ and ensures it is maintained to a high standard. Attendance at our regular services averaged about 9 people.

At Easter we hosted the group Good Friday service led by Rev Lyn Marsh and a few people walked with the cross to Stoke church after the service.

The group Remembrance Day service in November was well attended with the usual gathering round the War Memorial. Thanks to Rev Lyn Marsh the community choir came together to sing at the Carol service. Attendance at this service was a little disappointing - we think this may have been to it being quite early in December (10th) and the weather was appalling. Attendance at the Midnight Christmas Eve service was more encouraging.

The church is still opened every day thanks to a band of willing volunteers – we do appreciate everyone who gives up their time to ensure the church is open and from the comments in the visitors book it is appreciated as a peaceful space for reflection and prayer by people from all over the world. The community food bank box in the porch continues to work well with regular contributions. Prayers are left in the request box regularly too and these are passed onto the clergy to be included in the group daily prayer meetings.

We applied to take part in the Diocesan Digital Roll Out project and were chosen to be one of the churches to have a subsidised digital giving device. This took a little while to set up but has been used reasonably well since the end of August resulting with extra donations amounting to nearly £600 so far.

About once a month we provide refreshments for the Central Norfolk Wellbeing walking group who always appreciate the fresh coffee and cakes we provide.

The annual parish litter pick in April was organised again by the Parish Council and volunteers gathered in the Church afterwards for a light supper.

Cream Teas at the church have now become a regular highlight in the summer months and were even more successful this year. They were held on the last two Sundays in July and the first two in August. Thanks to all the volunteers who helped with the numerous jobs to make sure everything went well. Half the proceeds were donated to Hope Into Action (£1217)

In March a group from the local community helped to rake off the cuttings of old growth at the sides of the churchyard as suggested in the report of the Wildflower survey by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust which was carried out in 2022. This work seemed to result in more wildflowers being visible in the summer months.

We have progressed working with the Norfolk Archaeological Trust to investigate the possibilities of shared use of the church building. Some draft plans have been drawn up to provide some office space for the Trust and to make the space in the Nave more flexible for other uses. A feasibility study and consultation with the local community will be the next stage.

Iain Walker, the church architect carried out the Quinquennial inspection in Oct 2022 but there was a long delay in the report being issued. We finally received the report in Jan 2024 – there are no major repairs needed.

We would like to thank all those who have helped to keep things running this year, in particular those who

Plan and lead a variety of services

Clean the church

Arrange beautiful flowers

Play the organ

Unlock and lock the church

Maintain the churchyard and its surround

We thank David Spurgeon for his help with the accounts and our search for someone to relieve him of this duty continues. We also thank our Secretary Louise Collins who looks after the PCC administration.

Ian Bell who has worked very hard to keep the churchyard cut and tidy has recently informed us he cannot continue and we send Ian our great thanks for keeping everything so well maintained for many years.

We are facing the challenge of low attendances at regular services but we are grateful to have a good group of volunteers who continue to support the church in other ways.

Lia Day and Jani Wymer

Stoke Holy Cross with Dunston

Since last year's A.P.C.M. the church has seen some encouraging growth. The "All Invited" twice monthly gatherings in the church hall, which Rob and Cathryn launched last year, is continuing to flourish with a nub of families coming regularly, but with each time new people appearing or re appearing. It provides a relaxed opportunity for people to learn about Jesus, and what it means to follow him. We are especially grateful to all who help with this and especially to those who provide the food.

A Community cupboard is in place now outside the hall where folk from the community can either contribute or help themselves to the groceries when they have a need. We are grateful to the Poringland Womens' Shed who provided this,

Embers continues to provide a venue for young people on a Thursday evening. More adult volunteers are always welcome. There are currently 16 young people on the register.

Sparklers continues to thrive in term time for pre-school children with their parents/carers. We are grateful to Cathryn and her team of volunteers who continue to organise this.

We are, once more grateful to a team of people who give their time to maintaining the churchyards.

More dead trees have been dealt with at Dunston, and work carried out to the gulleys around the church to improve the drainage. At Stoke the Copper Beech which had to be taken down has been replaced by a Rowan Tree.

During this last year Stoke church has been beautifully redecorated and the memorials put back on the walls. The Keystone in the porch was also repaired and it is anticipated that will solve the problem.

We are, once more, grateful to the teams of people who take turns to clean the church.

Dunston church was used again at Christmas and since for a funeral. Phil Parker has submitted a report to Natural England about the Bats. Much has been achieved, but there remains an area of concern which he intends to deal with in April so, hopefully, then the church will be "bat free" with the bats having their own self-contained areas to live in.

In November we said goodbye to David Carrington in a funeral in Stoke Church. He had served for many years as a Church Warden and a P.C.C. member.

Our Christmas collections amounted to £300 and were to be divided between the Diocesan appeal to support a Christian hospital in Gaza, and Transforming Lives for Good.

Thank you, Father for Your love, support and guidance.

Viv Carrington and Andy Driver

PCC Secretaries' reports

Caistor St Edmund

Background

Caistor St Edmund with Markshall PCC has the responsibility of co-operating with the incumbent in promoting in the parish the mission of the church, be it pastoral, evangelistic, social or ecumenical. It also has the responsibility for the maintenance of Caistor St Edmund Church and churchyard.

Membership of the Parochial Church Council (PCC)

The following people served on the PCC from the date of the 2023 APCM:

Incumbent: The Reverend Robert Baker (Chairman of the PCC)

The Reverend Lyn Marsh

Churchwarden: Jani Wymer (Electoral Roll Officer; Deanery Synod rep)

Churchwarden: Lia Day

Elected members:

Louise Collins (Secretary)

Brian Day

The PCC welcomed the Reverend Kirsty Long in September 2023.

Church Electoral Roll

At the end of the year, there were 33 people on the church electoral roll.

Church attendance

With a service usually taking place every other week, 2023 saw a settled pattern of services. There were two different types of regular services held: Praise and Worship and Holy Communion. Praise and Worship usually took place on the first Sunday of the month, and Holy Communion usually took place on the third Sunday of the month.

Services

Holy Communion: 10 services with an average attendance of 11.

In 2022, average attendance was 7, and in 2021, it was 7.

Praise and Worship: 11 services with an average attendance of 8.

In 2022, average attendance was 7, and in 2021, it was 7.

During 2023, there were five special services with the following attendance:

Good Friday: 13

Service of Remembrance and Hope: 22

Remembrance Sunday: 25

Carol Service: 43

Midnight Mass: 21

Louise Collins

Stoke Holy Cross with Dunston PCC

Stoke Holy Cross with Dunston PCC has responsibility for both Stoke Holy Cross and Dunston churches.

Membership

During the year the following people served as members of the PCC

Incumbent	Rev Rob Baker
Wardens	Mrs Viv Carrington Mr Andrew Driver
Assistant Minister	Rev Lyn Marsh
Curate	Rev Kirsty Long (from July)
Elected Members	Mrs Eostre Caswell (Secretary)
	Mr Henry Caswell (Treasurer)
	Mr David Carrington
	Mr Andrew Harding

Mr David Carrington resigned through ill health and passed away later in the year. Grateful thanks are given for his many years of unfailing love, service and ministry.

Church Attendance

The number of members on the Church Electoral Roll will be advised at the meeting.

The average number of attendances at Stoke Holy Cross church for the year 2023 was:

10.30 am Morning Services 18 adults 4 children

3.30 pm All Invited (every fortnight) 22 attendees

All Invited, an informal gathering for everybody with activities and food, takes place in the Church Hall or the Vicarage.

There were two special services during the year at Stoke Holy Cross and the figures for these are not included in the average attendances shown previously.

Carol Service 52 adults 31 children

Crib Service 50 adults 28 children

Throughout the year at Stoke Holy Cross there were three funerals, two baptisms, one wedding and two interments of ashes.

At Dunston there were six morning services with an average attendance of 4 adults. There were two special services at Dunston:

Carol Service 40 adults

Amazing Grace service 20 adults

Review of the year

The PCC met nine times this year.

- Regular discussions have taken place on the state of the finances and the importance of regular tithing by church members.

- Many discussions took place about the bat issue in Dunston church; work has now been undertaken.
- There were regular updates on ongoing work in Stoke Holy Cross church and churchyard.
- It was agreed to appoint Iain Walker as the quinquennial architect
- Rev Kirsty Long joined with half her time spent at Poringland.
- After receiving expert advice, the decision was taken to stabilise the end wall of the Church Hall; this work has now been carried out.
- Regular finance reports have been received from the Treasurer.
- There were regular reports on youth work, giving feedback on the progress with Embers.
- The Partnership Agreement Renewal with Norwich Youth for Christ was continued.
- It was agreed that charitable giving would be made to support Nick Blanch as National Director for Youth for Christ
- It was agreed that Christmas collections would be sent to Transforming Lives for Good and the Bishop's Gaza hospital appeal; £150 was sent to each of these.
- Action Plans were created after each meeting with feedback on progress made given at the following meetings.
- Rob reported that he was acting as Safeguarding Officer until a replacement could be found for Alison Peck.
- It was agreed to go ahead with painting the interior of the church as generous donations had been received which enabled this to happen.
- Decisions were made on the allocation of grave spaces.
- Time was spent on considering the Worship Group document, including the possibility of a youth band from Embers taking part in some services.
- Time was spent considering how prayer could be made more accessible to all both at the prayer meetings, as well as in church.
- Time was spent thinking and praying about the various mission areas of the church, including children and families, the Dementia Café and Thursday morning coffee mornings.

Eostre Caswell

2. Areas of mission and ministry

Sparklers

It has been a good year for Sparklers with lots of happy, noisy Tuesday mornings spent with under-4s and their carers. We have a growing group of lovely helpers who prepare the room each week, welcome families, serve drinks and snacks, offer support and chat, and lots more. Each week we're in touch with over a hundred families through our emails and Facebook page, and see an average of around 20 in the church hall for our session. Following Covid, we'd seen less consistent engagement with the group than before, but this seems to be changing now with a good core of regular attendees who are building closer relationships with each other and a sense of belonging within the group.

We provide free play activities on a different theme each week, with a story and singing time at the end of the morning. Our themes and stories often connect to things we can learn about God, and we have started to provide little cards with Bible verses to take away, as well as always inviting families to church events like All Invited and Christmas/Easter services, and pointing them towards holiday club and Embers for older siblings or friends. We're also starting to run occasional "Refresh" sessions during Sparklers, which focus on looking after the grown-ups, providing adult craft activities and an accessible "though for the day" alongside the children's provision. We'll be developing this as we see what works best over the coming year.

I've been encouraged by having the opportunity to pray with some of the families during Sparklers sessions, when they have talked about situations they would like help with. I am also excited to see more Sparklers families starting to try out All Invited, and would love you to pray with us for Sparklers to become more and more of a "bridge" towards a deeper connection with God and with our church. At Christmas there was a beautiful picture of that in the way that so many older children came to the front to sing a song with Sparklers toddlers – they came up because they had been to Sparklers when they were much smaller and had positive memories, still feeling that it was "their" group and coming as a family to church in part because of that connection.

Cathryn Baker

Schools Ministry

We (the church) are so fortunate to be welcomed into the school over the course of the year.

On most Thursday mornings we take 'Church' assemblies. These are usually for the whole school (200 children). We (Rob, Gary and I) have chosen the theme for the term – this year they have been Mark's gospel chapters 1-4, the Lord's prayer and stories from Jesus' life.

Also on Thursday, at lunchtime, Games club has continued to be held. This is where I (and this year Kirsty has joined in when she can) play board games with children the school staff feel could benefit from a different lunch time. Some good conversations have taken place.

We were able to once again offer a Prayer Space in the lead up to SATS testing in May. Both children and staff engaged with the activities. Thank you to Cathryn for all she did to collect the resources and set up the space and those who welcomed children and staff into the space.

Through the year, we have been able to welcome school children to our buildings: reception class walked to the church (and back) just before Christmas and children from the choir sung at the Carol Service in Stoke Holy Cross in December.

I continue to serve as Chair of governors at the school, a pleasure and a privilege to be able to talk to and support staff, particularly the Headteacher. Also the many times I get to simply draw alongside children during their school day during the year.

None of the above will continue without prayer, so please pray for us.

Lyn Marsh

Youth Ministry

This year has been another exciting and dynamic time with the youth of Stoke Holy Cross. Embers Youth Club continues to be the highlight of many young people's week. We've been on quite a journey!

The group make-up has changed quite significantly since September when a group of high school lads stopped coming. Although this was a shame, it has opened up opportunities for younger ones to find their place in the group and express themselves. (There had been a few issues with attitude and respect with the older group of lads). Just recently, we have had a new small group of Year 6s join us. This means that the group is now made up of largely upper Primary and lower High School pupils. We have a core group of 15 attending each week.

We have continued our regular Bi-weekly Club Nights but have increasingly added a faith element, having felt challenged by this several months ago. This has included testimony, prayer stations and illustrated talks. On other evenings we have tended saplings at the Jubilee Meadow, had water fights, played taskmaster, eaten pancakes and had a trip out to QUAZAR in Norwich. We have also tackled some big issues including the sacrifices of royalty, identity, things we struggle with and 'what is Love? '. We are finding that the group really warm to these more structured evenings and engage really well with activities and discussions.

In the summer, two of our young people were baptised, which was a great encouragement to all. They also attended Encounter Camp run by Youth for Christ and met with God powerfully there.

Towards Christmas, some of the group formed a little band and practised a couple of songs for the Christmas services at Stoke and Dunston carol services.

As there are a few older members of the group now with quite a lot of younger ones, we are encouraging them take the role of young leaders. They are rising to the challenge and it is marvellous to see them leading games, serving in the kitchen and coming alongside others to offer support.

We are excited to see the group strengthen over the coming months. It really feels like a cohesive whole now rather than several smaller groups and individuals. Leading up to the summer we plan to identify those who will play important roles in the Holiday Club and maybe attend Encounter Camp to discover more things of God there.

Gary Watson

Homegroups

Caistor Lane

Another year of meeting together and meeting with God. We are just so fortunate that we have at times been able to meet in person as well as meeting on zoom.

During the year it has been a blessing to have times of worship, sharing together, praying together, studying the Bible and generally enjoying each other's company, as well as encouraging each other in our personal walks with Jesus, as well as praying for those people we meet in our daily lives.

More specifically, one of the highlights of the year was looking at the Alpha course together. We would really recommend everyone to do this course again, as it really challenged and encouraged us week by week.

More recently we have shared Bible passages which meant something to us or spoke to us in some way. Having this input from individual members of the home group has been a real encouragement as we have considered listened to why a particular verse or passage is so important to them.

It is such a privilege as a home group to continue the support of the education and general wellbeing of a young girl in India.

Our thanks go to Jan and Roy for their continuing hospitality in hosting the home group and making us all feel so welcome in their home.

Eostre and Henry Caswell

Praying together

We have continued to meet on Zoom for prayer each morning, Tuesday-Friday at 9am and Saturday 10am. Each meeting has a bible reading including a season from Mark's gospel, 1 and 2 Kings, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter and the Psalms, and concluding with readings and videos by Amy Orr-Ewing for the Advent season. Sometimes we have a worship song to help us lead into praying. We regularly pray for news items, across the world, but also locally we have a prayer calendar praying through the roads/areas in the Venta Group. Numbers attending vary but it is encouraging that we are now consistently praying more often as a church than we were before the pandemic. Following the last family meeting those who have led the online meetings had a meeting later in 2023 to consider how to go forward and to reintroduce meeting in person to pray regularly. We have held a couple of Sunday nights for Prayer and Praise and will continue this in 2024. May we continue to follow Jesus' example, to pray on our own but also together with others.

Lyn Marsh

Worship

This year our worship team have worked hard as usual to help our church engage with God through music. We've led worship each Sunday morning, as well as at other church gatherings – and even outdoors for our Coronation All Invited picnic! We've gathered others to join us as part of the community choir at Christmas, which enabled a good number of people who perhaps wouldn't yet call themselves Christians to sing songs about Jesus with us and join in with carol services, with an openness to getting more involved in future. Some of our young people learnt about worship by singing and playing Christmas songs at Embers in the autumn term, and some have joined in with the band on Sundays too. We've also been very pleased to welcome Stuart Long to the band since Kirsty joined us in the summer.

We're grateful for the worship team's faithful service, commitment to our monthly practices and desire to grow, learn new songs and try new things!

Our faithful worship team have continued leading us in worship on Sundays, at Christmas

Cathryn Baker

3. Some nuts and bolts

Safeguarding report

I am grateful to Alison Peck, who has served as Benefice Safeguarding Officer for a number of years, and stepped down in the 2023 APCM season.

When Alison stepped down I notified the Diocese that we had a vacancy for the time being, and I have continued to monitor the DBS checks and safeguarding training needs that all those working with children, young people and vulnerable adults are required to have in place. My experience has been that people are very ready to renew or complete this important training, and I am grateful for such willingness to do it.

I am encouraged at the development of safeguarding training across the Church of England. I completed my own leadership level training at the end of 2022, and found it to be the best thing I have completed, which I hope encourages all of us to engage with this important area of all of our lives.

Rob Baker

Deanery Synod

Loddon Deanery Synod met, as usual, on 3 occasions in 2023. Alongside our normal business we heard from Julia Chamberlin, the Diocesan Children, Youth and Families Projects Adviser; and Matthew Hutton, about his book *Your last gift – getting your affairs in order*. There was always time to share the encouragements and challenges of our rural churches, and to pray together. In the course of this year, David Owen confirmed his intention to retire as vicar of the Chet Valley churches, and therefore also as Rural Dean, sometime in 2024.

Rob Baker