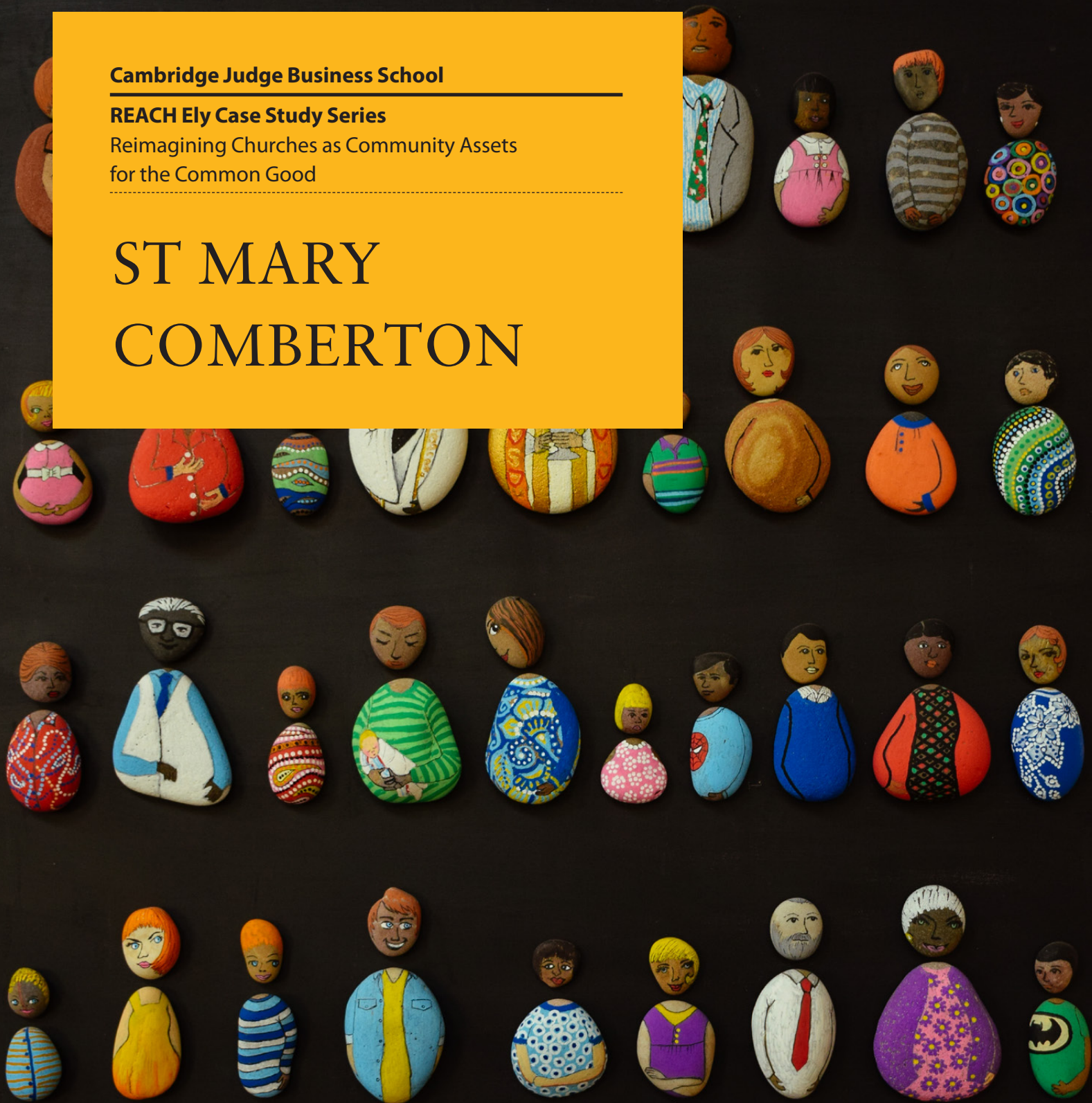


Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets  
for the Common Good

# ST MARY COMBERTON



... you also, like living stones, are being  
built into a spiritual house to be a holy

*Text, design, and photography*

**Dr Timur Alexandrov**

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation  
Cambridge Judge Business School

**REACH Ely (Reimagining Churches as  
Community Assets for the Common Good)**  
is a multi-partner research project that  
aims to help communities make fuller use  
of their churches.

*Editorial board*

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*The project is implemented by*

**Centre for Social Innovation at  
Cambridge Judge Business School  
and the Diocese of Ely**

*with the generous support of Allchurches Trust  
and Historic England*

**[www.reachely.org](http://www.reachely.org)**

The challenges facing church communities and their buildings have been extensively studied in the light of declining church attendance in the United Kingdom over several decades. REACH Ely aims to address the less-well-understood opportunities for churches to engage and reconnect with the 97.7 per cent of the local communities in the Diocese of Ely who do not attend their parish churches.

With the absence of universal determinants of success and failure of churches in the community engagement context, the REACH Ely project will provide an understanding of the relationship between communities and wider use of church buildings as well as the contribution that churches make to the common good. The project will determine community values, needs and opportunities that can be used in the most effective way to ensure a win-win outcome for communities and sustainable future of church buildings.

The **case study series** is based on in-depth interviews and observations about church building use with informants from a subset of deaneries and parishes in the Diocese of Ely, supplemented with secondary information about the communities they represent. The purpose of the case study is to unearth various church experiences in renovating and envisioning their buildings as missional and social spaces, engaging with local and wider communities, addressing current challenges, and learning from their practice.

The **Glossary** is a separate document that accompanies the case study series. It is available as a download from the project's website [www.reachely.org](http://www.reachely.org)

*On the cover: Painted stones with the Bible verse (1 Peter 2:5) exhibited at St Mary Comberton.*

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# ST MARY COMBERTON

**Church Category:** Rural

**Deanery:** Bourn

**Address:** Church Lane, Comberton,  
Cambridge CB23 7EB

**Website:** [www.stmaryscomberton.org](http://www.stmaryscomberton.org)

**Friends of St Mary's:**

[www.friends-of-st-marys.org.uk](http://www.friends-of-st-marys.org.uk)



## Summary

**Buildings and Artefacts:** Grade I listed building; The church stands on the highest ground in the village at the end of the picturesque walking path; Served and WC facilities; Improved car park; The organ as WWI memorial; North porch extension; Small museum in the bell tower chamber; c.13th century font; Pews with carved ends and finials; Medieval rood screen

**Congregation to Population Ratio:** 50 / 2,362

**Fundraising:** Friends of St Mary's group; Arts and Crafts exhibition; Church fete; Lottery fund; Concerts

**Income Generation:** Regular giving; Coffee mornings; Lettings; Fair trade sale

**Communications:** Website and Facebook page; Newsletter 4M; Village magazine; Weekly mail; Noticeboards; Visitors' book

**Community Engagement:** Summer Hamper Scheme; Overseas mission; Oasis teas; Holiday at Home Club; Children's craft activities; Lenten lunch; Church-school links; Selah; Churchyard tidy-up working party; Church fete; Concerts; Open gardens; Coffee mornings; Parish walk; Open days.

# ROOTS

## Profile

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Comberton is a large village with a population of 2,362 people (2011 census) situated in a rural area about 6 miles (10 km) south-west of the city of Cambridge in the district of South Cambridgeshire.

Archaeological finds, including a Neolithic polished stone axe (found to the south of the current village) and a Bronze Age barrow (to the north), suggest there has been a settlement here for thousands of years. A Roman villa was discovered in 1842. The village was mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086) as Cumbertone.

The parish covers 1,954 acres and is one of the largest parishes in the Bourn Deanery. Comberton is bounded to the north by the A428 road and is a short distance from the M11 motorway, allowing access to London to the south and to the A14 road to the north and east.

The village amenities include a village hall, a recreation ground, children's playgroup, the Meridian Primary School, Comberton Village College, and the Comberton sixth form school. The latter two are part of the Comberton Educational Trust. There is also a public house, shops, a post office, a recreation ground, a doctor's surgery, and a dental surgery. Highfield Farm Touring Park for camping and caravan travellers is set in the centre of the village. Comberton has two churches – a parish church of St Mary and a Baptist church dating from 1868.





*Top: View of St Mary's south side from the churchyard. Middle: Welcome noticeboard in the churchyard; North side of the church. Bottom: North porch extension and entrance door; In the centre of Comberton village.*

## Building

St Mary's parish church building dates from the 13th century although an older church may have stood here and been demolished for the new one. The Grade I listed church building is dressed with pebblestone and limestone with some clunch to the openings. It has a west tower, embattled with setback buttressing, a nave, north and south aisles, and a chancel. The late medieval nave roof features five bays with moulded and braced tie-beams. The chancel arch is late 13th century or early 14th century and similar to the south arcade. A compressive restoration was undertaken in the 19th century, retaining significant aspects of the medieval furnishings.

St Mary's church stands on the highest ground in the village and is about half a mile south of the crossroads that mark the village's focal point. The South Street that leads to the church is one of the convenient walking paths in the village. This part of the village having been abandoned when the population moved north to take advantage of the increased trade along the Cambridge-Sandy road in the 17th century.

Next to the church is a small barn, owned by the church, which has been used in the past for children's activities. This cost £30,000 to build. At present, the timber building has no access to water.

The church has suffered from thefts, including a stained glass window and multiple lead thefts. A roof alarm system has since been installed.

In 2018, the 5-yearly inspection report of the church building identified a need for repair. £40,000 were raised through the Friends of St Mary's group, grants, and the help of the Church Commissioners. The north porch was constructed using a

bequest and other fundraising to include WC facilities, and the floor was levelled to allow for disabled access. A servery with concealed sink was built some ten years ago. The car park has been improved and additional work is planned to create disabled parking spaces.

St Mary Comberton is open daily from 7.30 a.m. to 4 p.m. using an automatic door locking system on the north door. This was funded by the Proby Trust linked to Jesus College Cambridge, the patron of the church. St Mary's can accommodate approximately 170 people.

## Artefacts

A small museum is set in a chamber in the bell tower displaying information about the parish and samples of old metalwork uncovered in the area. The chamber was refurbished, using money from the Millennium fund, so that visitors can climb the tower and see the wooden bell-frame. There are four working bells.

Other artefacts include the c.13th century font and a number of pews originating from around the 16th century with carved ends and finials, and there is a large amount of similar panelling around the walls of the north aisle, now used as the lady chapel. The chancel rood screen dates from the 15th or early 16th century with much original woodwork both to the closed panels and in the vertical tracery. It has been moved and the end two bays have been removed to make it fit in the chancel arch. In the chancel some of the choir stalls incorporate original work, including a poppy-head with two half-angels. The church organ was installed in 1919 and is the First World War memorial for the village. Centenary celebrations were held in 2019.



“It’s a place where you can go for religious things or not. It’s at the end of a nice walk, so people do walk up here, and then walk back down again. That’s its only negative thing, it’s not in the middle of the village. So you don’t get drop-in people who just pass it and would go in... We try to turn that negative into a positive, I suppose, in that it is a space that is slightly on the edge, a retreat space, a different space.”

Revd David Newton, Vicar

Richard Elleray, Treasurer of the Friends of St Mary’s



*Top three: View from the nave towards East window; Medieval roof screen; Seating arrangement in the nave.  
 Middle: Servery with the coffee machine and consealed sink; WC facilities in the north porch extension. Bottom: Barn's exterior and interior.*



# RUNNING

## Team

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St Mary Comberton is a member of the Lordsbridge Team of Churches (founded in 2010), a group of 11 parishes spread over villages to the west of Cambridge. The Lordsbridge Team comprises the churches in the villages of Hardwick, Dry Drayton, Caldecote, Comberton, Toft, Great and Little Eversden, Coton, Barton, Harlton, and Haslingfield.

The ministry team of St Mary church includes the vicar, two licensed lay ministers, two churchwardens, and a volunteer youth worker. The Lordsbridge Team employs an administrator, paid for by the 11 PCCs.

## Religious Services

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St Mary's church holds a weekly Sunday service and a more traditional service at 8 a.m. on the second and fourth Sundays. On every fifth Sunday, there are team services held in one or two locations across the Lordsbridge Team. There is a Tuesday morning prayer group. Once a year, a West of Cambridge ecumenical service is held at Comberton Leisure Centre.

## Parish Share

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The parish share expenditure request for 2020 is £33,082.

### Fundraising

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**Friends of St Mary's (FOSM)** group was established in 2016 to raise funds for church improvements and upkeep. FOSM is a separate charity with its own trustees; it was granted charity status in January 2018 and it made grants of £18,000 for repairs in that year. The fundraising target over six years is £35,000. Fundraising events include a Song Cycle, Bedford Gallery Quire Workshop, Open Gardens, and concerts. The majority of the group (about 70%) are non-churchgoers. FOSM has its own website: [www.friends-of-st-marys.org.uk](http://www.friends-of-st-marys.org.uk).

**Arts and Crafts exhibition** is a three-day event organised by the local Art Society that can raise up to £1,000. The church charges 20% commission of the sales of the artwork that comes to the church.

**Church fete** is an annual fundraiser which generates approximately £2,000 (*See Events*).

**Concerts.** These are held both in the church and in one of the FOSM trustee's houses, where there is a grand piano, and can raise £1,000.

**Lottery fund.** The church has received some funding in the past.

### Income Generation

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**Regular giving.** About £35,000 is raised from donations, including plate envelopes, standing orders, and the Parish Giving Scheme.

**Coffee mornings** are small social events organised in the village hall 2-3 times a year that bring about £400 per year.

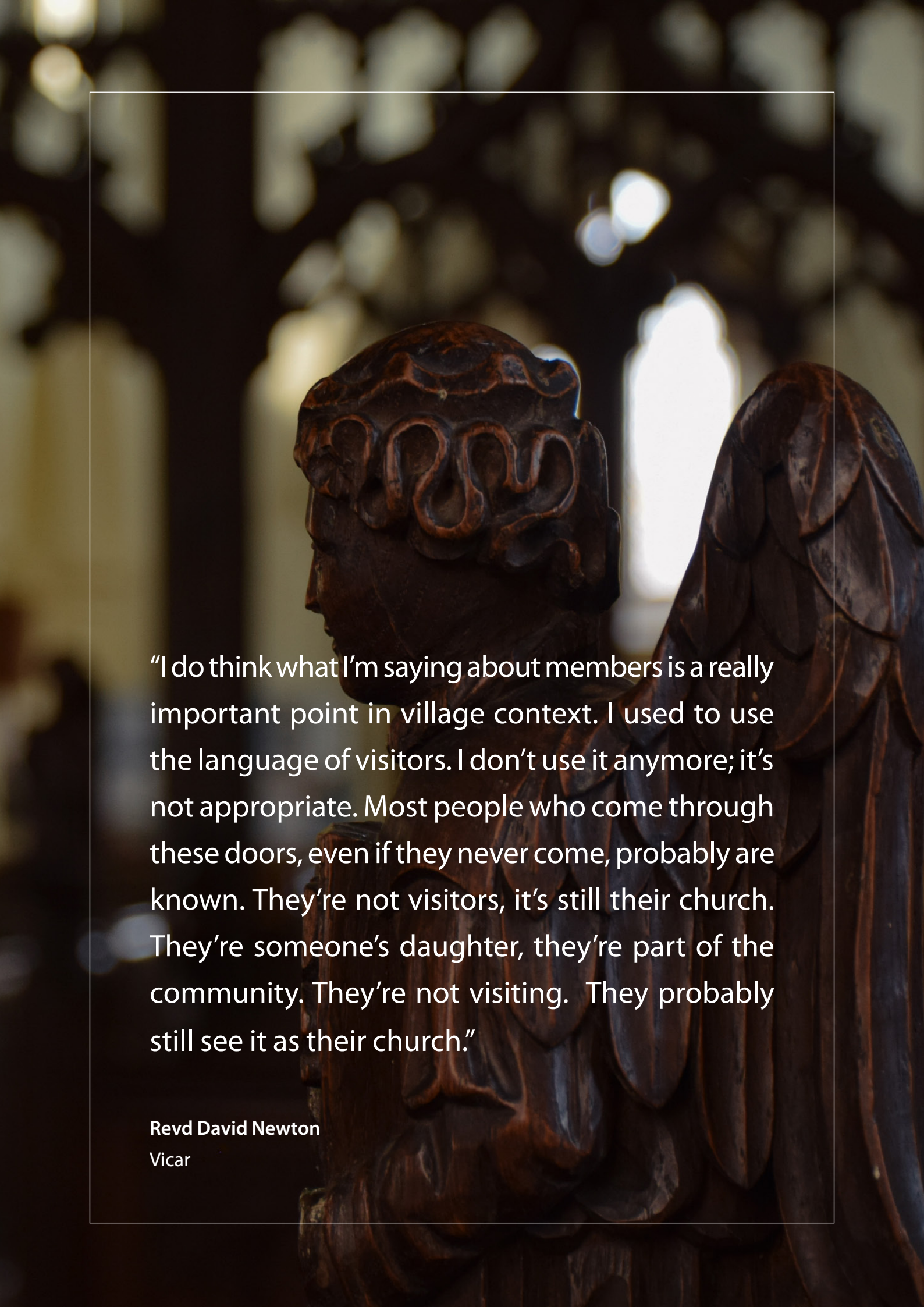
**Lettings.** The church building is not currently hired out as pews inhibit this. But the location and other local spaces do not make it an attractive option.

**Fair Trade sale.** In the past, a member of the church run the Fair Trade coffee mornings and sale once a year for a few years. The event generated about £200.

### Communications

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The church has its own **website**, as do the Friends of St Mary's. It also has a **Facebook page**. Church **newsletter 4M** (Members of St Mary's Monthly Missive) is issued on a monthly basis. The church publishes a list of services and a letter from the vicar in the **village magazine Contact**. There is also a **weekly mail** out that goes to about 55 people. The church places posters on the village **noticeboards**, and distributes occasional flyers and postcards at Christmas and Easter. The **visitors' book** is available in the church.

A dark, carved wooden sculpture of a figure with a headpiece and wings, set against a blurred background of light. The sculpture is the central focus, with its head turned slightly to the left. The background is a soft, out-of-focus bokeh of light spots, suggesting an interior space with windows or a large hall.

“I do think what I’m saying about members is a really important point in village context. I used to use the language of visitors. I don’t use it anymore; it’s not appropriate. Most people who come through these doors, even if they never come, probably are known. They’re not visitors, it’s still their church. They’re someone’s daughter, they’re part of the community. They’re not visiting. They probably still see it as their church.”

Revd David Newton  
Vicar

# REACH

## Community

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**Summer Hamper Scheme.** In partnership with the Meridian Primary School, St Mary Comberton runs the Summer Hampers Scheme.

The project offers weekly food hampers to families who have children on free school meals to help them through the financially more onerous summer holidays. Letters and flyers are distributed through the school to the appropriate families (unknown to the church). Those families wishing to take up the scheme then return the flyer to school who passes it back to St Mary Comberton. Each week during the holidays an online delivery – with the ingredients for five hot meals to replace the free school meals – is repackaged by the church into hampers with custom-made recipe cards and then delivered to the families.

Financial contributions are received from the local charitable trusts (Herringland), the Parish Council, and church donations.

The scheme worked really well in Comberton and has been launched in Caldecote (Lordsbridge Team parish) in partnership with the primary school there. In addition, St Mary's left-over funds were used to run the hamper scheme over the Christmas season as well.

“What’s extraordinary about that is, talking about fundraising, how quickly money poured in for that in comparison to other things. It’s an obvious easy need. It’s not a building, it’s not ‘oh please help us run the church’, abstract sense.”

**Revd David Newton**  
Vicar

**Overseas missions.** There have been particular connections between St Mary's church and the diocese of Kigali in Rwanda through the diocesan link. Two people have been on the diocesan trips and then kept up regular contact with pastors and churches out there. St Mary's also hosted the Prince of Peace Gospel Choir. The missionary family now work in the UK. The community has also raised funds for a church in northern India.

**Oasis teas and Holiday Club.** In Partnership with Comberton Baptist Church and the Catholic Community, Comberton church organises a monthly tea for senior citizens in the village hall which involves a hymn singing, a short prayer, and a talk on Christian inspired ideas and persons. Holiday at Home club is organised in August.

**Children's craft activities.** These are organised for special events such as Easter and Mothering Sunday.

**Lenten Lunch.** Tables are laid out in the aisle for this event. The church has done several events with tables down the central aisle, which worked reasonably.

**Church-school links.** A youth worker leads activities in the secondary school, whereas the vicar is active in the primary school. All youth work is outsourced to the West of Cambridge Christian Youth Ministries (WCCYM) and there are a number of volunteer youth workers who are involved in secondary schools. The youth worker from Comberton church is part of the volunteer team for WCCYM.

**Selah** is a new initiative offering an alternative way into Christian spirituality. The word comes from the Psalms and means 'pause'. Monthly sessions in the village hall, involving Christian-inspired movement and meditation, are organised by the vicar's wife who is a registered exercise professional.

**School of theology.** The vicar has revived this scholarly initiative, which involves five monthly sessions in Coton (Lordsbridge Team parish), and around 18 people attend.

**Home groups.** There are four home groups, which meet fortnightly to organise Bible studies. In total, approximately 45 people attend, some from other churches.

**Churchyard tidy up.** Twice a year, a working party gathers to maintain the church grounds.



1st row: Remembrance Poppies; The Christingle Service. 2nd row: Summer Fete; Commissioning of the Social Committee. 3rd row: Summer Fete; Maundy Thursday. 4th row: Coffee and Conversation; Sacred Space (A Team initiative) (Photos by Comberton church).

## Events

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**Arts and Crafts exhibition** is an annual event that takes place over three days in December.

**Church fete.** The outdoor event takes place during August Bank Holiday weekend, both inside and outside the church. There are book stalls, plants, clothes, toys, live entertainment by local groups, music, teas and homemade cakes, a raffle with prizes, and games for children.

**Concerts.** A local choir Village Voices holds concerts in the church and the Friends of St Mary's organise other fundraising events.

**Open Gardens.** This is an annual event, organised by the Friends of St Mary's, which takes place in July. Several open to the public gardens provide refreshments and plants.

**Coffee mornings.** Small coffee mornings, organised 2-3 times a year, raise around £400 each, although their main purpose is community outreach.

**Parish walk.** The Lordsbridge pilgrimage walk takes place in June and has been running for four years. It is a spiritual, team-building event that attracts around a dozen participants. The walk takes in all the churches in the Lordsbridge Team and covers about 22 miles. People can walk shorter sections if they wish.

**Open days.** These are held in mid-June and have run every few years. They would involve bell-ringing, organ recitals, and fun activities for children.

## Engagement

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**Focus on children and youth.** The church, as part of the Lordsbridge Team, supports (both financially and with volunteers) the work of WCCYM. This enables rural, village churches to bring young people together under a wider umbrella, rather than being isolated in small churches. There are currently 8 children under 5s. The youngest ones use the creche whilst those 3+ do an activity with someone from the children's team at the back of church. If St Mary's finds volunteers, the church will begin using the barn again.

**Summer Hamper Scheme.** The church runs the food hamper scheme for families on low incomes (*See Community*).

**Focus on wider community.** Many of the events organised are targeted at non-worshippers, such as the fete and the coffee mornings. A large number of those involved with the Friends of St Mary's are non-worshippers.

“Individuals who come to the church are so well integrated into the village. Everything you go to, every club, every whatever, you’ll find members of St Mary’s are there, and they’re aware of what needs there are out in the community. We’re not just a little group that meets here and doesn’t do anything else.”

**Mary Jenkins**  
Churchwarden





# REFLECTIONS

## Challenges

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### Church location

St Mary's church sits at the edge of the village, which is seen as both a challenge and an advantage. The church, however, offers a tranquil and quiet space for those walking up the footpath. *'I've seen young people come up here and revise for their exams in the churchyard. We do occasionally have art groups sitting outside and painting the church,'* adds Mary Jenkins.

### Church building condition

The Grade I listed status means that improvements to the facilities are restricted. For example, the PCC had wanted to put another room on the north porch extension but were not allowed. To accommodate children's groups, the barn, which has no water supply, had to be built outside the churchyard wall causing less convenience to use it. The extension that was permitted in the north porch is too small to accommodate a new boiler room.

### Vandalism

The church has suffered from theft in the past and the geographical location of the church may have contributed to this issue. Since the automatic door locking system, there have been no problems yet the roof alarm system has been funded by a loan, with repayments of £4,000 per year.

### Income generation

The Friends were formed to focus on income generation for the repair of the fabric of the church building. In addition, thefts of lead from the roof have been costly and the church now has an alarm system. To prevent further thefts, the church installed CCTV as part of the automatic door unlocking system, thanks to the interest-free loan from the Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust. Reserves are currently low and need rebuilding. There are several other

buildings available to rent within the village and nearby villages, meaning that there is low demand for rentals, although the village hall is almost at full capacity.

### Asset management

Improvements have been necessary to make the church more accessible and these are ongoing. The roof is coming to the end of its life and the PCC needs to plan for this expense. The oil central heating system may need to be replaced at some point.

### Youth engagement

The ministry team is aware of the need to engage with younger people through school visits and other initiatives and seeks to encourage children and young people into the church. There is a small number of under 5s attending the church regularly but insufficient numbers to make use of the children's barn. There is a carpeted area set aside for babies and toddlers at the rear of the church during services.

### Community attachment to church fixtures

The idea of opening up more space within the church, particularly towards the back of the church and around the font, both for events and wheelchair access, has not received full support both within the PCC and the village community. It remains unclear whether the space in the church would be suitable for various activities, if such a renovation ever occurs, because of the church location and heating as primary issues. The status quo restricts rental opportunities for the church and potential donations are missed.

### Senior demographic

The senior demographic of the congregation has the potential impact of reducing the number of people within the congregation who are able to volunteer in the running of the church.



## Lessons Learned

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### To work in partnership

The church is supported by and contributes to other churches within the Lordsbridge team. Examples include the parish walk and the shared youth services. The team has introduced a lecture series and 'bread church', which come under the 'fresh expressions' banner, but these are held in other churches within the group.

*Team partnership:* The church employs a team administrator who could not be funded by individual parishes and eases the burden for all. They also oversee all wedding administration for the team. The Team Chapter includes all licensed lay ministers and clergy working in the team, and enables churches to share resources and personnel.

*Ecumenical partnership:* This has been crucial in the village context, principally this is seen in Oasis Teas.

*Lay ministry partnership:* In the multi-parish context, St Mary Comberton is reliant on the work of the laity.

*The wider village partnership:* For example, the Friends of St Mary's and Summer Hampers Scheme rely on village partnerships.

### To create a living church

The introduction of an automated locking system has allowed the church to be accessible throughout the day for those wishing to drop-in for prayer, quiet contemplation or family research.

### To integrate the church and the community

Through organising the Friends and other outreach activities, it has been established that there is a larger community beyond the congregation who are willing to

support the long-term future of the church.

### To apply transferable skills in church management

The Friends and the PCC bring a range of skills to the management of the church and its fundraising activities.

### To improve accessibility

The PCC is actively seeking ways to make the church more accessible for the disabled including dedicated parking spaces and easier access to the building. There is a loop system for the hard of hearing.

### To adapt the church building for more flexible and a wider use

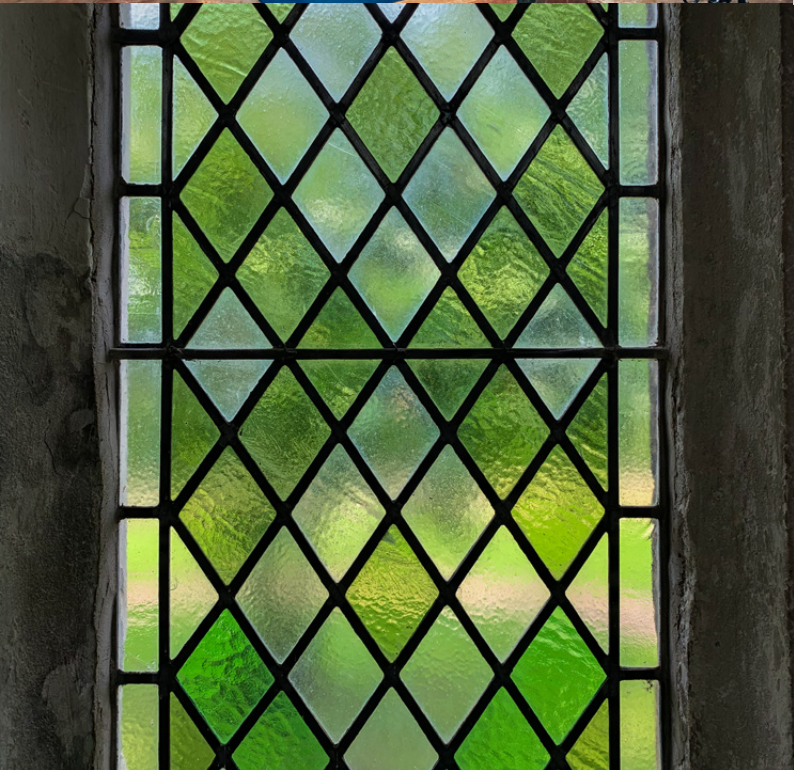
The addition of a kitchen and WC facilities has enhanced the facilities for worshippers, those attending weddings, funerals and baptisms, as well as occasional visitors. The car park has been improved to make it wheelchair friendly. Further small alterations are planned to make the church building and the space around it more accessible to all. For example, two tarmacked disabled spaces, which will lead straight onto the path, are planned.

### To maintain and strengthen the connection within the worshipping community

The church organises a range of groups and activities outside the traditional services which strengthen friendships and provide opportunities for prayer and reflection.

### To support people in need within the community and beyond

The food hamper scheme has been very successful and is very well supported within the community. The church would like to do more of this kind of work. The overseas missions (in Kigali and North India) were also well supported.



“Given that Comberton is well-served with halls and amenities, and given the location of the church, St Mary’s is never going to be the main community hub for the village. It has its particular space on the edge as a retreat, as a quiet space outside almost, and that is its uniqueness and its beauty, and its gift, in this context.”

Revd David Newton  
Vicar

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