

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

ST PETER & ST PAUL WISBECH



Text, design and photography

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**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.

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The project is implemented by

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

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and Historic England*

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

On the cover: The Last Supper mosaic at St Peter & St Paul's church.

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ST PETER & ST PAUL WISBECH

Church Category: Market town

Deanery: Wisbech Lynn Marshland

Address: Church Terrace, Wisbech,
Cambridgeshire PE13 1HP

Website: [www.achurchnearyou.com/
church/14026](http://www.achurchnearyou.com/church/14026)

Changing Market Town project:
www.elydiocese.org/changing-market-towns



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Grade I listed building with two naves and three aisles; Free-standing church tower; No WC or kitchen facilities in the church; Orthodox community dedicated area in the church; Church hall with modern facilities and the mission office; St Peter's Lodge with meetings rooms; Architectural remains of the 12th-century church; Remnants of medieval stained glass; Decorated style chancel; Stuart monuments; Victorian organ

Congregation to Parish Population Ratio: 56 / 7,764

Fundraising: Friends of the church group; Annual Rose Fair; Last Night of the Proms; Micro fundraising

Income Generation: Rental income; Parish Giving Scheme; Investments

Communications: A Church Near You webpage; Facebook page; Pew sheet; What's On sheet; Online services and reflections shared with sister church St Augustine Wisbech; Noticeboards

Community Engagement: Rose Fair; Last Night of the Proms; Lunch in the Lodge, AA meetings and community events at St Peter's Lodge and garden; Church social group; Connection with the Orthodox Church; Supporting the homeless; Peter's Petals flower rota; Choir; Focus on families and younger people; Youth and women's groups; Little Fishes; Collaboration with school assemblies; Mothers' Union.

ROOTS



Profile

Wisbech is a Fenland market town (population 31,573 in 2011), inland port and civil parish in the Fens of the Isle of Ely, Cambridgeshire. The town lies in the far north-east of the county, bordering Norfolk and only 8 km (5 miles) south of the Lincolnshire border. The tidal River Nene running through the town centre is spanned by two bridges. In 1934, part of Walsoken parish, Norfolk was merged with Wisbech, bringing with it schools, shops and public houses but leaving the church and much of the rural part of the parish in Norfolk. The suburb of New Walsoken is now largely built up with housing developments.

The A47 road, bypassing the town, links Wisbech to King's Lynn to the north and Peterborough to the south-west. The seven miles of railway from March to Wisbech closed to passenger services in 1968 and to freight in 2000. There is now a campaign to reopen the line to Wisbech to connect its large population to the national rail network.

Wisbech is well served for cultural and sporting clubs and activities and has over 205 listed buildings and monuments. These include Wisbech Castle grounds, coaching inns, a Georgian playhouse, and the Wisbech and Fenland Museum. The town is also the birthplace and home of many notable figures, including a number of social reformers and philanthropists, such as Thomas Clarkson, the slavery abolitionist and the famous 'Son of Wisbech', and Octavia Hill, a co-founder of the National Trust. Wisbech has a college of further education, two secondary schools, including the Independent Wisbech Grammar School founded in 1379, and a good number of primary and specialist schools, two of which are Church of England schools.

Wisbech is a participating research site of the Diocese of Ely's five-year project **Changing Market Towns**, an expression of one of the Levers for Change within the diocesan Ely2025 Growth Strategy, that focuses on enabling and sustaining church growth (www.elydiocese.org/changing-market-towns) (See also REACH Ely case studies *Huntingdon, Littleport, and March*).



The Grade I listed church building with the free-standing tower and gardens.



The high street in Wisbech has been in decline for a number of years, with the closure of many of the traditional shops and banks. In 2016, the Wisbech High Street project was awarded a £1.9m grant to bring back into use empty properties on the High Street. The Heritage Lottery Fund grant for this project will run until 2021. The town's major employers are Nestle Purina PetCare and Princes food and drink group. The area has seen a huge influx of migrant workers from Eastern Europe, particularly from Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania, estimated to be in the region of 10,000¹, seeking work in the agricultural industry and the food processing factories. The presence of such a large number of migrants and the strain placed on health, housing and education services has caused tensions within the town². There are considerable problems surrounding poverty, homelessness and street drinking: the Ferry Project offers support to those in need, including an overnight shelter, and there is a foodbank at Wisbech Baptist Church.

There are two Anglican churches in Wisbech town – St Peter & St Paul's, St Augustine's church and All Saints church in Walsoken. Other denominations are represented by a Roman Catholic Church (The Church of Our Lady and St Charles Borromeo) together with a Methodist, Baptist, and Free Church. The United Reform Church and an African Pentecostalist Church have very small congregations in a shared building but The Salvation Army has a Meeting Hall and Social Centre and has had a long presence in Wisbech.

The yacht harbour on the river provides 128 berths on the marina, and the nearby Crab Marshboat yard operates a 75-tonne boat lift. Wisbech has been subject to flooding and a number of tidal surges, most seriously in recent times in 1978. In December 2013, the town's river flood defences were tested.

¹ 'Wisbech: The end of the road for migrant workers', *The Guardian*, 8 October 2014.

² 'New report shows how Wisbech is bearing the brunt of mass immigration and the strain it places on health, housing and education', *Wisbech Standard*, 11 August 2016.



*Top: East window and choir stalls. 2nd row: View from the chancel towards the nave; Two-nave configuration with arcades.
3rd row: North aisle and High Altar.*

Building

The church of St Peter and St Paul was founded in the 12th century and sits in a prominent location in the town centre. Originally on the shore, between the water and the castle built by William the Conqueror, the church now sits in a small park (the former graveyard) encircled by a busy road and town centre buildings. It is a large church with an unusual free-standing grand tower, with battlements and pinnacles, in the Perpendicular style with a cavernous vaulted space in its base that acts as a ceremonial entrance to the church. The tower, dating from about 1525, is set apart from the main church building to avoid damaging the church should it collapse, as the earlier Norman tower had done due to the instability of the soil. The tower houses 10 bells in good condition.

The church building, given Grade I listing in 1951, is constructed from limestone with Barnack dressings, limestone and pebble rubble originally plastered. The church has been reconfigured over the centuries as the congregation expanded and as parts of the building collapsed and needed to be rebuilt. The current configuration of two naves and three aisles with unusually tall piers and arcades give it a cathedral-like atmosphere.

Many additions and rebuildings over the centuries resulted in windows and arches being off-centre. The church was extensively renovated during the Victorian period and the pews date back to that period, some of which have been removed from along the external walls at the western end of the church. Temporary ramps have been installed for disabled access. The church has a sink in the vestry but there are no WC or kitchen facilities. The gas-fired heating system works well but is hugely expensive to run. The sound system is in need of updating. An application was made in 2019 for a Heritage Lottery grant for the relaying of the lead on the north and south aisle roofs, various other repairs to the roof

and rainwater goods, repairs to the stair turret, vestry windows and ground-level drainage to alleviate a damp problem in the walls. It is hoped that this funding will allow for the installation of two new WCs and a kitchenette.

The church building can accommodate over 400 people. It is open during daylight hours in summer and winter. In the church, there is an area dedicated to the use by the Orthodox community in Wisbech.

Church hall and St Peter's Lodge. Across the gardens, there is a church hall, built in the 1930s, with a stage, smaller meeting room, a kitchen, a suite of lavatories, and a room upstairs that is used as the mission office. The hall was renovated thanks to funds raised by volunteers from the Princes Trust in 2018. There is a large carpark in what was formerly the vicarage garden. The church also owns a small house, St Peter's Lodge, which has meeting rooms and an upstairs flat.

St Peter and St Paul Wisbech is featured in *England's Thousand Best Churches* by Simon Jenkins (2012).

Artefacts

All that remains of the 12th-century church is the north aisle and the base of the west tower. St Peter and St Paul church features remnants of medieval stained glass which have been reassembled into Victorian frames. There is a large floor brass commemorating Thomas de Braunstone (d. 1401) who was Constable of Wisbech Tower under Richard II, said to be one of the finest examples in England. The chancel was rebuilt in the Decorated style in the 14th century along with a south chapel. The north wall contains two very fine Stuart monuments, both depicting a man and a woman kneeling and facing each other over a prayer desk, surrounded by an alabaster frame of gilded pillars, strapwork and arms. The organ is of concert standard and dates from the Victorian period.



Top: Panoramic view of the High Altar mosaic depicting the Last Supper. 2nd row: Royal coat of arms and memorial. 3rd row: Sundial above the church entrance; Reproduction of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Virgin of the Rocks* displayed in the church. 4th row: Norman north arcade, dating from the mid-12th century; Visitors in the church nave.

RUNNING

Team

St Peter and St Paul's church is a member of Wisbech Churches Together, a group of churches that organises joint meetings of clergy and hold joint services in various churches. The ministry team of St Peter and St Paul's church includes the incumbent, who also has responsibility for St Augustine's church, three authorised lay ministers, a reader, an associate priest, a curate in training and a youth worker. There are also two churchwardens, a treasurer, and an operations manager.

Religious Services

The Communion service is held at 8 a.m. on a Sunday morning, followed by a short Russian service 'Obednya' and a Eucharist at 10.30 a.m. Around 50 people attend the traditional Sunday morning service. On the fourth Sunday there is a family service instead of Eucharist. A Healing Mass is held on a Thursday morning always attracting fifteen or more people and Morning Prayers are from Tuesday to Friday.

Every two months, a Russian Orthodox priest leads a Mass, attended by around 50 people, largely drawn from Eastern European residents. A substantial proportion of the members of the congregation live outside the parish. In 2019, the church launched Saturday Street Prayers, which are held in different streets in Wisbech, as notified on St Peter and St Paul's church Facebook page.

The team regularly conducts assemblies at two of the three primary schools in the parish as well as at the grammar school. The youth worker visits the secondary academy but does not conduct services. The vicar is the Mayor's Chaplain, who regularly leads civic services as well as the annual service of remembrance. A service of consolation for the bereaved, organised by local undertakers, is held at the church in the autumn.

Covid-19 impact. Church services and other activities were temporarily suspended during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. During the period of the national lockdown, the church was keeping in touch with people via Facebook by sharing **Prayers of the Day** and encouraging words, **broadcasting live videos** of vicar's Night Prayers and Holy Communion services with organ music. During the second lockdown, on the Remembrance Day in November 2020, the church's service was **broadcast** beginning with a short act of Remembrance. Facebook reminders were posted about the **open foodbank** in Wisbech Baptist Church.

Parish Share

In 2019, parish share expenditure was £26,000.

Church organ and an area dedicated to the use by the Orthodox community in Wisbech.



Fundraising

A **Friends of the Church** group was relaunched in 2020 with the support of a former Mayor and local businesses. Members will be expected to pay a substantial annual subscription and in return will receive invitations to events, the opportunity to have their names inscribed in the building and to become involved in the reordering of the church. The aim is to eventually raise £15,000 per annum.

Rose Fair. This annual fair is a major fundraiser for the church, which in 2019 raised £12,000. The flowers purchased cost in the region of £3,500 and the funds are raised from refreshments and donations. The church is considering charging for entry and having market stalls in the gardens when the fair is next run (*see also Events*). Because of the pandemic, the event did not take place in 2020 with serious consequences to the church's fundraising and budget.

Last Night of the Proms is an annual music event held in the church to raise significant funds. The event is themed to specific music period and genre and features the King's Lynn Town Band. Near 200 attendees visit the church for the event. Tickets are priced at £10 (concessions £7.50) and include a light buffet served during the interval. The interval auction also goes towards the upkeep of the church. Attendees have the chance to win a prize in our raffle. *"I always make a point to say goodbye to everyone at the end and most people said to me 'see you again next year' so that was nice,"* adds Trevor Wright, the churchwarden.

Micro Fundraising. Because a lot of community outreach church projects depend on donations, the PCC uses online micro-fundraising www.JustGiving.com to generate funds to secure the future of the church.

Income Generation

Rental income. The church hall generates funds from hiring out its space, and St Peter's Lodge can also be hired out. Due to the over-supply of 'public spaces' in Wisbech, bookings are falling and rentals for both sets of premises barely cover their costs. For this reason steps are in hand to licence the parish house (St Peter's Lodge) to a Children and Family Counselling Charity that proposes to upgrade and adapt the premises as a family counselling centre. The church will only receive enough income from this to reserve funds for repair, but will at least be absolved of the spiralling costs.

Parish Giving Scheme. Members of the congregation are generous in their contributions to the Parish Giving Scheme, which are made via standing order.

Investments. The church also has investments which produce an income and will benefit from the Diocese of Ely Changing Market Towns initiative.

Communications

Wisbech church uses the 'A Church Near You' **website** and has an active **Facebook page**. There is a weekly **pew sheet** and a monthly **What's On sheet** available in the church. The vicar has appeared on **local radio** to talk about events and other items. **Noticeboards** with visitor's information about the church and the gardens are installed in the churchyard.



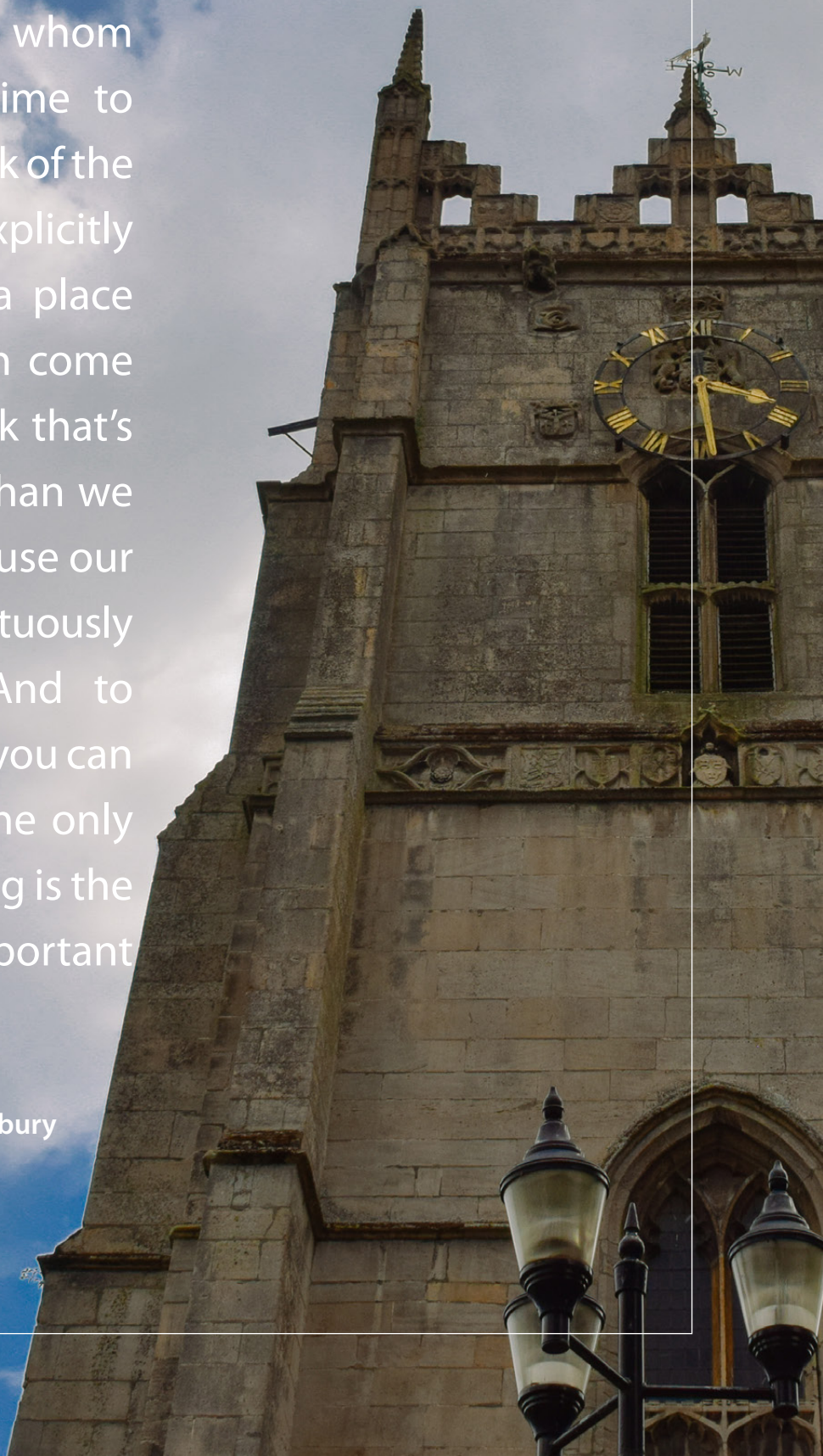
Top-left: Revd Canon Matthew Bradbury welcomes HRH Prince Charles at St Peter's church on 17 December 2018 (Photo by Wisbech Standard);

Photos 2-5: Last night of the Proms event in 2019;

Photos 6-10: Rose Fair event in 2019 (Photos by Ian Carter, www.wisbechstandard.co.uk).

“[The church] offers a place of quiet and tranquillity and apartness for people. A number of the people that come in, and whom I will see from time to time sat at the back of the church, aren't explicitly religious. This is a place where people can come and sit, and I think that's more important than we give it credit because our lives are just tumultuously overstimulated. And to have somewhere you can just sit – where the only thing that's moving is the dust – is a very important thing.”

Revd Canon Matthew Bradbury
Incumbent



REACH

Community

St Peter's Lodge. This church-owned building has been used for a variety of community projects, including a school art project and the training of lay ministers and churchwardens. Wisbech Learning Community, a Diocese of Ely project, is also based here. The Lodge has an upstairs flat, which was previously used by a curate. The building has a garden and has been identified as suitable for family conciliation sessions in the future (see *Rental Income* above).

Church Social Group. This group is responsible for organising some of the events in the church and church hall, such as Last Night of the Proms. The Rose Fair Committee is separate from this, as it is such a large event.

Connection with the Orthodox Church. There is a large number of Eastern European migrants in the town and many visit and worship at the church. A Russian Orthodox office for Morning Prayer has been introduced on Sunday mornings and an Orthodox priest visits to say Mass every two months.

Supporting the homeless. On cold winter days, when the night shelters usually are shut during the daytime, the church is open for the homeless to offer hot drinks, soup and snacks, and the heating is left on. Churchwarden and a team of ladies make sure that hot drinks and soup are always available to those in need of them during the day.

Volunteering. The church is supported by voluntary cleaners and a flower arranging rota, Peter's Petals.

Choir. Wisbech church has a small choir but has both the space and the opportunity to accommodate a much larger group. The minister is hoping to build a larger and stronger choir in the future.

Events

Lunch in the Lodge is a monthly meet-up event for elderly people.

Last Night of the Proms (*see Fundraising*).

Rose Fair (www.wisbech-rosefair.co.uk) is a major event for the church, held each July, and raises a considerable sum of money (*see Fundraising*). It attracts between 5,500 and 6,000 people over four or five days. The Rose Fair began in 1963 when local rose growers sold rose buds in the Parish Church in aid of its restoration fund. The church still uses this occasion to raise funds for the upkeep of its ancient building, but over the years, the Rose Fair has grown into a town festival. The gardens outside the church are transformed into a market place where other local churches and organisations provide stalls and activities to raise funds for their causes. On the Saturday, the Wisbech Round Table organise a parade of floats through the town.

“People come here and bring their children for baptism but getting them back to church afterwards is almost impossible. We are trying everything, and we will continue to try. Our approach to young people is to go find them at the schools, to win the confidence of parents and carers at schools, and to build fresh expressions there. Then, if possible, to link back to the parish churches minister... If we are going to attract young families, it will be, I believe, through the work we do in the schools and perhaps some other rich vein that we haven't mined yet.”

Revd Canon Matthew Bradbury
Incumbent

Engagement

Focus on families and younger people. The congregation falls predominantly within the older age range and the church has struggled to engage with families and younger people. For this reason resources provided in the five-year Changing Market Towns initiative (funded by the Church Commissioners) have been carefully used to appoint two Children and Family Workers to operate in the two church Primary schools (neither in the parish) and a Youth Counsellor in the (secular) Secondary Academy. The objective is to take Christian service and ministry to the children and their families 'where they are', and the activity of the worker in the Orchard's Estate (St Augustine Parish) is explicitly aimed at starting a 'fresh expression of church' under the aegis and as a part of the ministry outreach of both parish churches. The Children and Family worker in St Peter's Church of England Primary School (which relocated in the 1960's to Walsoken parish) works directly to the Vicar of All Saints Walsoken but with similar goals.

The Youth worker in Thomas Clarkson Academy (which serves the whole town) has succeeded in bringing and acknowledged and visible Christian presence into a secular school while operating within mutually agreed and very strict boundaries, as might be expected in a state secondary school which is not faith or church aligned. Her work to bridge this into town-wide youth ministry under the auspices of the Diocesan Youth Work programme 'Thrive' is in its very early stages but she has already recruited Lay Mentors to assist her in the Academy.

The Youth Group. The church youth group has closed due to poor attendance.

The Women's Group continues to meet on a regular basis for social and charitable purposes but is mainly supported by elderly members.

Alcoholics Anonymous. The church hosts this group in the church hall, which meets on a Wednesday evening.

Little Fishes is a popular stay and play praise group for toddlers and their parents and carers. The group runs on a Friday morning in term time at St Augustine's church hall from 10 a.m. and offers songs, stories, prayers and crafts. There is no charge to attend.

Collaboration with school assemblies. Assemblies are held at local church schools on a regular basis, including the Grammar School.

Mothers' Union. The combined branches of the Mother's Union, under the leadership of St Peter and St Paul Wisbech, have provided a grant for the church's first school worker. This role is also partially funded by the Diocese of Ely. The group is well-supported and has played an important role in the mission of the church.



Details of the stained glass in the church. On page 18: Stained glass depicting Saint Peter and Saint Paul.

REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Church congregation decline

The minister of Wisbech church has made it his core mission to build the numbers attending the Sunday services, and attendance has improved, albeit slowly. The congregation consists of largely retired people, many of whom take an active role in the life of the church, but this group are gradually stepping down from their responsibilities. Although initiatives are in place to take the church out into the community and to attract younger people, the challenge is to have this feed through into the traditional church services, allowing St Peter and St Paul's church to continue with its role as the established church.

Vandalism

Wisbech church is rarely left open at night (see *Community*) as there have been episodes of anti-social behaviour arising from problems with drugs and alcohol in the town. The presence of street drinkers also deters some people from coming out to events at the church in the evenings.

Income generation

Wisbech town is well provided for in terms of rooms for hire for parties, clubs and meetings, including the church hall. Therefore, there is little opportunity to hire out the church itself to external parties (see *Lessons Learned*).

Need for additional personnel and volunteers

The Rose Fair takes up a huge amount of volunteer time and as the volunteers are mainly retired there will need to be succession planning and a change in format if the event is to continue. PCC members also invest a lot of the energy in the event planning and organisation.

Church hall condition

The church hall will need a considerable amount of money spent on it fairly soon. It is difficult to obtain grants for repairs to this building and, apart from Sunday School, there is little recognition within the town that the church hall has any kind of relationship with the church. Some difficult decisions about the future of the hall will need to be made in the near future.

Low aspirations within the town

There is a lot of negativity within the town given the decline of the town centre and problems have arisen from the challenges brought about by the influx of large numbers of migrant workers and the burden that places on public services.



Lessons Learned

To work in partnership

The specific challenges of an influx of migrant workers to Wisbech have provided an opportunity for the church to welcome communities of other denominations in the church and to extend its ministry to them. Quite a large number of children from the migrant communities have been baptised at the church.

To be open and responsive to change

There may come a point where the renovations required to the church hall are unaffordable and the building may be sold on. Therefore, it would be essential to include kitchen and WC facilities when the church is reordered. The PCC is also looking to make fundamental changes to the Rose Fair, the church's biggest annual event, to make it manageable for the volunteers and continue to provide a worthwhile income for the church, given that the number of visitors has gradually declined.

To create a living church

In line with the Fresh Expressions initiative, the church takes services out into the community, into schools, where the aim is to win the confidence of the children, their parents and carers, and through the newly-established street services. The schools also come to the church for their Christmas and end-of-term services.

To increase opportunities for further church and community integration

The Friends group has been relaunched but, unusually, it is focused on the business community and ways in which improvements can be funded through partnership and sponsorship arrangements, e.g. sponsoring a particular piece of renovation.

To apply transferable skills in church management

The application for a Heritage Lottery Fund grant had required a great level of business expertise and this had been superbly managed by volunteers from among the church members.

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

The planned renovations will include facilities that will make the church more useable for future events and functions. If the church can overturn people's reluctance to come out to events in the evening, the church could host more frequent concerts and other events.

To be open to people who might feel overwhelmed or intimidated by the church

The church's town centre position is ideal for attracting visitors and those who wish to drop in to simply enjoy the quiet of the building. The incumbent has become accustomed to visitors calling in during services and welcomes this.



“[Care for the fabric of the Parish Church] needs to be driven by people who are passionate about the church building, who probably aren’t religious at all, but who have a real affection for the building; and people do, they regard St Peter’s as the town church, no question. But we need to harness that enthusiasm and say to them ‘we will pay for the mission, you need to pay for the building’. But we are 5, 8, 10 years out from that.”

Revd Canon Matthew Bradbury
Incumbent

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