

Church is a Beacon of Hope in the Heart of Breckland

Lockdown has been a very busy time for the team at St. Mary's Watton. During the past ten months the church has been involved in ongoing activities supporting the local communities.

Subject to very strict procedures to keep visitors as safe as possible, the church has been open for private prayer during the past few months enabling those who seek it to find comfort and solace and the light and airy space. The labyrinth cut on the church green earlier this year has provided a peaceful outdoor space for walkers who want to find some peace, particularly invaluable when the church building has had to be closed due to government restrictions.

So how has the church been reaching out to worshippers when the church has been closed for worship? "As well as seasonal prayer booklets, we have been sending out regular written reflections on email," says Vicar Gerry Foster, "and our Church Buddy system has ensured that no one is left out. Buddy Group Leaders stay in touch with those in their group and post out printed copies of reflections and other church news to those who don't have internet."

The church website and Facebook page have been invaluable tools in keeping the whole community connected and updated with news and links to the regular live-streamed services. "We have a dedicated team who are working hard to develop and distribute our online efforts," says Revd Gerry.

As Christmas approached, pastoral care across the board was redoubled in direct response to the growing local need. Suitably attired and maintaining social distancing rules, a group of volunteers put together bags of Christmas cheer to be delivered to those living alone or anyone who had been particularly struggling during the second lockdown. On top of this, the team made up over 50 craft bags to be delivered to local children.

Families Matter Keyworker for Watton, Marianne Starling has been overseeing a number of activities vital to the ongoing wellbeing of families in the area. Her supportive role has been even more important during this time as families struggle with access to usual facilities. The Holiday Kitchen was launched at Easter to provide extra provisions for families during the school holidays. Thanks to volunteers from the church and the community food parcels have been regularly delivered to families across the town. During the Christmas holidays the Ho Ho Holiday Kitchen also delivered Christmas gifts and the craft bags alongside the food deliveries.

All of these activities are welcome examples of how church and community can work together to serve local people. Another fantastic project was the delivery of a number of Christmas dinners to townspeople. Deputy Churchwarden Paul Weatherill gave his thanks to Florentina Catering for their excellent service in getting so many meals out in time for Christmas. Hot food deliveries continued on Christmas Day itself as Curate Revd Kyla and her husband Peter took meals to other local residents as well as to two homeless gentlemen. Working with people from Thetford Food Bank, Revd Kyla was able to get additional supplies to the men on Boxing Day.

"The situation regarding homelessness is ongoing," said Revd Kyla, "and as a church we are committed to helping in any way we can. Working alongside the police and Breckland Council we have been able to assist a number of gentlemen this year. Still more needs to be done to ensure that anyone in this situation is housed quickly. Their safety and wellbeing is of paramount importance."

Whilst worship and safe access to the church building remains essential, Revds Gerry and Kyla took the difficult decision not to have congregations at the Christmas services, choosing to live-stream

them instead. "Reviewing all the information available at the time, we felt that it was the best way to keep everyone as safe as possible." said Revd Kyla. The church then held its first drive thru Christingle! It is usually the most popular service of the year and this year many volunteers braved the cold and the rain to bring Christmas cheer to visitors who came in their cars to see the lights on the church and church green and to receive their Christingles, ready bagged for home assembly. The youngest volunteer was just 4! Chocolates and biscuits donated by local man John Lister from Thorp House were also given out to families. Great fun was had by all – it was described by one man as a "beacon of hope".

The community of St. Mary's have been kept very busy during the pandemic, offering support and vital services to local people. "Of course, this is all backed up by the army of people praying for it all. Everything we do comes from prayer plus action." says Revd Kyla. "We couldn't do what we do without the prayerful support of the whole community."





