

Winter Newsletter 2026

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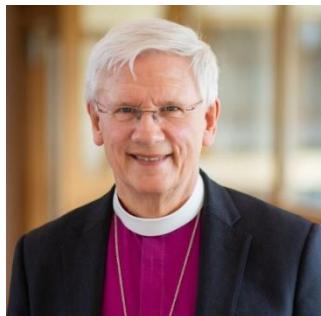
Registered Charity Number 1172186



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From the Chair: The Rt Revd Colin Fletcher writes:



Dear Sisters and Brothers

With the coming of the New Year I, along with many others, have been wondering what it may bring. For me one of its highlights will come on May 13th when I will be in St Paul's Cathedral, as I have been regularly over the past 30 years, at the Clergy Support Trust's Festival Evensong. For those of you who don't know about it it's a celebration of CST's work in the context of worship led by three cathedral choirs (St Paul's and two others) who each sing one part of the service on their own and who then come together for a glorious anthem

towards the end of the service. The service is ticketed, but no charge is made for the tickets, and to get one you simply need to go to CST's website at <https://www.clergysupport.org.uk/> Hopefully I may see a number of you there.

In marked contrast to this was their lovely carol service at the King's Chapel of the Savoy early in December, led by just four singers, which was equally enjoyable and which, for me, heralded the start of the Christmas Season. The reason I mention this service in particular is that at it they launched their new strategy for 2026 - 28, a document of particular interest to the RCA as it includes in its Fifth Aim - '*We will continue to develop a strong, clear and compelling voice to advocate for those we serve.....As part of this, we hope to develop our focus on retired clergy wellbeing in 2026, in partnership with other organisations*'.

In that context you won't be surprised that the RCA is one of those organisations that will be working with the CST to make sure that the help they can offer is widely known to our members, their spouses and families, and indeed to all retired clergy who may be looking for their help. Currently one of the oddities with their grants is that about 90% of them go to serving clergy and only 10% to those who have retired

and who no longer have PTO or a licence. I suspect, given the very large number of clergy and, more particularly, their dependents, in the latter category, that it would be good if in some way these proportions could be rebalanced, without disadvantaging the needs of serving clergy, though hopefully some of these needs will become less pressing as stipends and pensions rise later this year well above the rate of inflation following recent Synodical and Archbishops' Council decisions.

Another highlight of my December was being able to go to the Conference organised by Simon Hill at the Pleshey Retreat Centre, for Retired Clergy Officers from the Eastern Region. Speakers there included representatives from the Pensions Board and also from St Luke's for Clergy Wellbeing (formerly St Luke's Hospital for the Clergy) that now has a particular focus on wellbeing and mental health. In addition, the St Edmundsbury and Ipswich Diocesan Director of Mission and Ministry, the Revd Canon Sharron Coburn, gave us a fascinating talk on her reflections about the continuing ministries of 'retired' clergy. As well as leading worship she spoke enthusiastically about the many gifts that retired clergy can bring to the Mission and Ministry of a Diocese if they are properly encouraged and supported in doing so.

To that I would add that from what I see across the country as a whole, far too little thought has gone into diocesan thinking about this area of ministry in the past, though I am hearing a number of encouraging reports, whether from Truro or Exeter or Rochester and, indeed, the National Church Institutions, that things are beginning to change, with much more emphasis being placed on asking retired clergy how they feel called to exercise their priestly ministry rather than leaving it to unproven assumptions or chance and then allowing them and equipping them to do so.

But enough of my musings. Clearly each of us is still waiting to see what benefits the Pensions Review will mean for us individually and then there is the excitement as our new Archbishop takes office. 2026 also sees the Centenary of the Pensions Board itself and I give thanks for Archbishop Randall Davidson and others who pressed for the need for Clergy Pensions in the 1920's when there had been none before (and for the advocates of housing provision which came in some two decades after that) and for those who continue that work today.

Your Friend and Brother *+Colin Fletcher*

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The Work of St Luke's in the 21st Century

Many of our readers will be familiar with the long and distinguished history of what was Saint Luke's Hospital for the Clergy until 2009. In early December, I caught up with Tim Ling, Chief Executive of what is now St Luke's for Clergy Wellbeing, to learn more about its work.

To find out more, visit <https://www.stlukesforclergy.org.uk>.

CC: With a mission of being the Church's independent wellbeing advocate, and a focus on wellbeing and psychological support, how is the work developing?

TL: We believe we play an important role in serving the Church as a small, independent advocate for clergy wellbeing. We aim to be a learning organisation, drawing on evidence and experience from clergy, exploring, for example, what it means to talk about brokenness in ministry and mental wellbeing.

Our work focuses on three areas:

- Advocacy for clergy wellbeing
- Building communities of good practice
- Caring for those broken in ministry

We value partnership working with organisations such as the National Ministry Development Board, the Clergy Transition Service, the Retired Clergy Association (RCA), and the Faith Workers' Branch of Unite the Union.

We also recognise that clergy experience transitions throughout their lives - including retirement, both as it begins and as it evolves. These transitions can affect identity, purpose and vocation. To address this, we are working with the Pensions Board, the RCA and Diocesan Retirement Officers (DROs) to gather evidence and experience, particularly to inform thinking and practice around pre-retirement. Our Chair of Trustees, Revd Canon Stephen Fielding, has recently engaged with DROs, including those in the Eastern Region.

CC: What is the current main emphasis of your work?

TL: We aim for clergy wellbeing work to be primarily preventive, while remaining restorative where needed. To this end, we are partnering with the Henry Smith Foundation¹ to support dioceses in providing pastoral supervision for clergy through training pastoral supervisors, funding and resources.

Currently, we are working directly with the Church in Wales² and 13 Church of England dioceses and hope to recruit another 11 during this project. This focus is based on evidence showing that clergy engaged in pastoral supervision report better levels of wellbeing.

CC: How might retired clergy engage with you?

TL: Retired clergy can explore resources on our website for personal support and, importantly, feel encouraged to share their own stories. Doing so helps break down the stigma of struggling with mental health in ministry, whether in a clergy chapter or directly with St Luke's. These conversations are treated with care and respect.

CC: Thank you. For more insight, I recommend Tim's blogs, which can be found under the *Newsletters and Blogs* section at <https://www.stlukesforclergy.org.uk>.

¹ See <https://henrysmith.foundation/about-us/>

² [Link to video of St Luke's Director of Wellbeing at Church in Wales event](#)

Charles Chadwick

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From the Secretary

In July, the General Synod's Private Members Motion asked the Archbishops' Council to commission a "comprehensive, independent review of what is needed to ensure that clergy and their dependents are supported in retirement with dignity and fairness". It requested that this be chaired by an independent lay person "with a working group representing all relevant interests, and engaging fully with clergy, clergy spouses, retired clergy and other stakeholders", and that it should report back to the Synod within 12 months.

Well, here we are 6 months later and we know nothing about the review group's membership, independent Chairman, terms of reference, or its plan to consult as the motion required. Is this going to be another example of kicking the can down the road? It looks unlikely now that it will meet the deadline set by General Synod to report by July 2026, I wonder why its establishment has been delayed?

¹ See <https://henrysmith.foundation/about-us/>

² [Link to video of St Luke's Director of Wellbeing at Church in Wales event](#)

Please consider putting yourself forward for election to Deanery Synods and possibly General Synod in 2026

2026 is a moment of potential change for the Church of England, with a new Archbishop at the helm and a new General Synod waiting to be elected. By the end of the year, we will have a clearer picture of the direction the Church could be taking, and the scope of what might be possible up to 2031. Although many may not realise it, just where that window of opportunity begins and ends is very much in the hands of ordinary members of the Church.

The voters are the members of local Deanery Synods, which by chance also happen to be up for election this year, in the Spring of 2026. Deanery Synods are not usually seen as the most exciting of groups, although they can be a good local forum for sharing experience. But their influence over the composition of General Synod later in the year cannot be over-estimated. If you care about the direction of the Church, standing for Deanery Synod is one way to make a difference.

Synodical Opportunities for Clergy with Permission to Officiate:

(1) Deanery:

- (a) May attend Synod as may any other Member of the Public unless the Public are excluded.
- (b) Are/is *ex officio* on Deanery if already Member(s) of General or Diocesan Synod.
- (c) May be elected to represent other Deanery Clergy with Permission to Officiate, with one Clerk chosen to represent every ten such clerks with Permission to Officiate, or part of ten³;
- (d) May be co-opted by the Deanery House of Clergy.
- (e) Chapter attendance is by invitation, and not of right.

(2) Diocese:

- (a) May attend Synod without voice or vote, as may any other Member of the Public, unless the Public are excluded.
- (b) Will be a Member *ex officio* of Diocesan Synod if a Member of General Synod.
- (c) May be elected to Diocesan Synod by the Members of Deanery Synod, the co-opted Members having no vote; but *all* Deanery Synod Clergy are eligible to stand.
- (d) May be co-opted to Diocesan Synod by its House of Clergy (five maximum).
- (e) May be Nominated a Member of Diocesan Synod by the Bishop (ten maximum including any lay Nominees).
- (d) Limited opportunities to serve on diocesan groupings, councils and committees since some have rules specifying that clerical members must be beneficed or licensed.

(3) General Synod:

Any clergy eligible to be elected to Diocesan Synod are also eligible to be elected as proctors of the diocese and thereby become Members of the General Synod.

¹ Synodical Government (Amendment) Measure 2003

In rule 14(1) after sub-paragraph (a) there shall be inserted the following sub-paragraph— “(a)any clerk in Holy Orders who is duly authorised to act as chairman of meetings of the council by the bishop in accordance with paragraph 5(b) of Appendix II to these rules;

(a)for sub-paragraphs (a) to (d) there shall be substituted the following sub-paragraphs (which are about who is entitled to take the Chair) — “(a)by the chairman of the council if he is present;

³ Church Representation Rules

Rule 24 (2) (e) “one or more clerks in Holy Orders holding permission to officiate in the diocese who are resident in the deanery or who have habitually attended public worship in a parish in the deanery during the preceding six months. One clerk may be elected or chosen for every ten such clerks or part thereof, elected or chosen in such manner as may be approved by the bishop by and from such clerks.”

(b) if the chairman is not present, by the clerk in Holy Orders, licensed to or *with permission to officiate* in the parish duly authorised by the bishop with the clerk's agreement, following a joint application by the minister of the parish and the council or, if the benefice is vacant, by the council for the purposes of this sub-paragraph;

(c) if neither the chairman of the council nor the clerk mentioned in sub-paragraph (b) above is present, by the vice-chairman of the council:” *Malcolm Liles*

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How are Retiring and Retired Clergy Supported?

Mapping the Provision that the Church of England Offers to Ministers Facing Retirement and in Retirement

Dr Mauro Fornasiero is a social scientist with expertise in the evaluation of complex interventions in health, social care, education, and in religious settings.

Since 2022, he has assisted The Revd John Eatock, Dean for Retired Clergy in the Diocese of Truro, with the evaluation of the reflective practice group 'Preparing to retire well and beyond'. Exploring the meaning of priesthood in retirement, this group supports the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of Anglican clergy approaching retirement and in retirement.



Stemming from his work with the Diocese of Truro, the paper 'How are retiring and retired clergy supported?' reviews the provision that the Church of England offers to ministers facing retirement and in retirement. It can be found at

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14704994.2025.2480359>

I can highly recommend this very thoroughly prepared and well-presented paper. It reminds us that in 32 dioceses retired clergy outnumber their full-time equivalent colleagues. Thoughtful insights into both ministry in retirement and wellbeing in retirement along with where and how responsibility for retired clergy may be found and how it may be expressed, have the potential to not only inform us but to also contribute to the wider work and debate on ministry in retirement. *Charles Chadwick*

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Releasing the Gifts of Retired Clergy for Diocesan Mission & Ministry

Introduction

Retired clergy carry deep reservoirs of pastoral wisdom, liturgical competence, and spiritual maturity. Their calling continues, and their availability—when freely offered—strengthens diocesan mission in significant ways.

Psalm 92:12-15

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

¹³ They are planted in the house of the Lord;
they flourish in the courts of our God.

¹⁴ In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,

¹⁵ showing that the Lord is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

In early December 2025, Revd Canon Sharron Coburn (Director of Mission and Ministry for St Edmundsbury and Ipswich) met with the Bishop's Officers in the Eastern Region responsible for enabling and the wellbeing of Retired Ministers and the care of their widows/widowers. 15 in total met at the Retreat House in Pleshey.

The following illustrates what was discussed during this residential meeting:

The Strategic Value of Retired Clergy

How retired clergy support the wider diocese:

They are a stabilising presence

Especially important during vacancies, restructuring, or large multi-parish benefices.

By multiplying capacity

Providing sacramental, pastoral, and teaching support that allows stipendiary clergy to focus on mission priorities.

They may hold continuity & memory

Offering historical perspective and ecclesial wisdom in times of rapid change.

They offer support for clergy wellbeing

Reducing pressure on incumbents and curates; offering informal mentoring and ministry resilience.

This is *not* unpaid labour to fill gaps. It is participation in a shared vocation.

Examples of How Retired Clergy Can Contribute⁴

Worship & Sacramental Ministry

- Leading services in times of vacancy
- Covering Sundays so clergy can engage in mission or take time off
- Midweek Eucharists, seasonal services, occasional offices

Pastoral & Discipleship Support

- Visiting the sick and homebound
- Bereavement follow-up
- Spiritual direction and pastoral conversations
- Supporting confirmation preparation or discipleship courses

Mission & Community Engagement

- Chaplaincy in care homes, hospitals, prisons, or community organisations
- Helping pioneer or support fresh expressions and new worshipping communities
- Teaching and formation of lay leaders

⁴ See for an extended offering *Supporting the ministry of clergy after retirement from office: guidance for bishops and archdeacons*

churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/2._supporting_ministry_after_retirement_sep_2021_final.pdf

- Calling to areas of need; no current clergy presence, new build estates

Diocesan & Deanery Support

- Assisting with clergy development groups
- Mentoring curates or newly licensed lay ministers
- Advising vacancy teams and PCCs
- Contributing to synodical or governance roles when invited

Retired clergy should offer what gives life, not what exhausts them.

Building Healthy Structures for Collaboration

By encouraging enabling environments through:

A clear, streamlined PTO process

Efficient safeguarding, renewals, and communication help retired clergy feel valued rather than burdened. Continual good, effective vocational conversations for ongoing engagement.

A named diocesan contact for retired clergy

Could be a bishop's chaplain, archdeacon, or allocated deanery officer. Attention given to the auditing and deployment of skills. Invitation to be heard and offer feedback.

Inclusion in communication and training

Retired clergy should receive diocesan newsletters, invitations to study days, and prayer resources. They should be given the tools to discern how to continue in ministry which is both meaningful and fruitful.

Pastoral care for retired clergy

Annual gatherings, chaplaincy to retired clergy, or access to wellbeing support.

Mutual respect and clear boundaries

Clarity around expectations avoids misunderstanding and protects incumbents and retired clergy alike.

Current Landscape

The demands on the time of our retired clergy are increasing in relation to family need.

- 1 in 4 working families and 1 in 3 working mothers use grandparents for childcare
- 63% of all grandparents with grandchildren under 16 help out with childcare
- 1 in 5 grandmothers provide at least 10 hours a week of childcare⁵

It is important to recognise the different stages of retirement. When clergy first retire, they may be ready to move into this new stage of ministry with vigour and anticipation or be tired and exhausted from the demands of their last post. Ageing is not consistent. There are further considerations such as medical

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/looking-after-the-grandchildren-make-sure-it-counts-towards-your-state-pension>

needs, family prioritisation and the freedom to take on or leave responsibility. The group identified 4 key areas.

- Newly retired with energy to take up further responsibility across an area.
- Energy to continue ministry within their own context.
- Diminishing responsibilities.
- Homebound or in assisted care.

As clergy age, or circumstances and/or competencies change, support may be needed to help the transition between stages.

Current Support

On behalf of the Eastern Region, St Edmundsbury and Ipswich Diocese organise the pre-retirement residential for clergy and a day retreat for clergy with their spouses or civil partners. Each diocese has Bishop's Officers that offer support for the wellbeing of retired clergy and the widows/widowers of clergy in some form.

Moving Forward

To move forward the group identified ways in which to aid the smooth transition into PTO ministry. The current viewpoint was described as retirement 'hitting a brick wall' a 'block in the road' or a 'ditch'. Conversation around 'not being any different' and 'still a priest' (or deacon) ensued. To remove this block or to fill in the ditch and create a natural flow into a new season of ministry, the process needed further consideration.

Retired clergy wished to be valued, to be released to live out their ministry, to realise they have the freedom to choose what areas to be involved in and opt out where necessary.

To move from 'use' to 'recognise'. 'Use' being the draining of the person for practical reasons which is unfulfilling, to 'recognise' were the person can grow in a new season of ministry that recognises their vocation and contribution. For the ministry to be seen as continued vocation that is fruitful rather than 'service fillers'.

Thoughts from the group included:

- Early intervention: a conversation around what retirement looks like earlier, part of last 10 years in MDR.
- Access to safeguarding training and fit for purpose, especially for those 80+.
- Support when the last ministry post has not been a positive experience.
- Structures in place that lower the barriers.
- Training and support for relationship building between Incumbent and Retiree and Archdeacon and retiree.
- Light touch MDR; learn from other dioceses, glean good practice.
- How to enable clergy to arrive at retirement without exhaustion and being 'wrung out'.

Sharon Coburn was ordained in 2013 and has held a number of roles in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich before becoming Director of Mission and Ministry in 2024

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A Word from the Editor

Thank you to those who have kindly shared with us some interesting and insightful stories and reflections on the seasons of Advent and Christmas. Growing up in a vicarage, my two children were told every year by their mother as Christmas approached, "When Dad ask you to do something, do it straightaway and don't rile him. Remember he always suffers from PFT – Pre-Festival Tension – as Christmas gets nearer".

For the next newsletter I would be pleased to receive articles pertaining to readers' experience of chaplaincy. Perhaps you have served as a chaplain in an institution such as the Armed Forces, a hospital or a school or as chaplain to a mayor or in a more informal capacity such as to school staffroom. Perhaps an encounter with a chaplain is part of your calling to ordination. Your thoughts, reflections and stories will be most welcome.

If you feel you have a comment or an observation on anything you have read in this newsletter, do please write to me.

Items from members for the Spring newsletter should be with me please by Friday 10th April, at cjpchad9@aol.com preferably in Word, Calibri 12-point narrow margin. Thank you.

The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Retired Clergy Association of the Church of England.

Charles Chadwick

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Reflections on Advent and Christmas

Advent & Christmas in the Parish of Cuxton and Halling 1987 -2024



As far as I can remember, when I arrived in the parish in 1987, the existing pattern was to hold a gift service for the Church of England Children's Society early in Advent and a Christingle on one of the Sunday mornings leading up to Christmas. One or other of the two Churches would host the parish Carol Service, which was one of the high points of the year for the combined Cuxton & Halling Choir. Midnight Mass actually started at 11.00 to avoid the problem experienced in earlier years of drunken

revellers coming from the pub and disrupting the service. This was held at St Michael's Church Cuxton and extra chairs had to be brought in in order to accommodate the huge congregation. There was also a long tradition of a Scout & Guide carol service which also filled the Church. At that time, policy was that the parish should become one congregation with two buildings, Halling Church having recently needed extensive and expensive restoration work. There were, therefore, 8.00 am Communion services every Sunday in either one Church or the other, 10.00 likewise, except once a month at Cuxton it was Mattins, and then Evensong in either Cuxton or Halling at 6.30.

In 1987, the restoration work at Halling was nearly complete. It was decided that there would be a mid-morning Eucharist every Sunday in both Churches and 8.00s and 6.30s would continue to alternate between the two. They would be two churches again, each serving its distinctive community, but working closely together with a common governance. Both Churches therefore would expect to have the liturgical provision to which any Church is entitled. [After some years, 8.00s, Mattins & Evensong disappeared from

the Sunday schedule due to lack of support. We became one of those parishes which I had previously thought of as anomalous in which the daily offices were said every day except Sunday!]

Cuxton continued to host the Scout & Guide Carol service, the Nine Lessons & Carols and the Midnight Mass. We moved the Christingle to 5.00 pm on Christmas Eve and incorporated a Nativity Play and the Blessing of the Crib. Very quickly, this became one of the best attended services of the year at which we welcomed lots of families with young children. Some of those children were still coming as parents or grandparents themselves almost forty years later when I retired. The same could be said for the Scout & Guide Carol Service, which was conducted much less formally than the Nine Lessons & Carols. This latter was based very much on Milner White & Kings College Cambridge. Of late, mulled wine & mince pies were served after the Nine Lessons & Carols. One of our congregation was a baker.

Over the years, attendance at the Midnight Mass declined considerably and, so far, it has not been resumed after CoViD. Christmas Communion is 9.30 am on 25th. There were daily Eucharists in the Christmas Octave (as there were throughout the year except on my day off), but they were not well attended.

I have wondered whether it was fair to continue with the Gift Service at the beginning of December. October sees Harvest Festival with its collections for the Foodbank (latterly replacing the collection of fresh produce which was difficult to distribute in good condition) and the diocesan Poverty & Hope Appeal. In November we collected shoeboxes for Blythswood with gifts mainly for people in Eastern Europe. Then there was the Poppy Appeal. But people still want to give gifts at Christmas. So we carried on with Gift Services in both Churches on the first Sunday in December. As the Children's Society stopped running children's homes, we gave toys & clothing to Social Services, another parish's local appeal &, most recently, the Salvation Army.

I was keen to introduce an Advent Carol Service. We did try it at Halling, thinking to balance with the Nine Lessons & Carols at Cuxton, and also at Cuxton, but it was not a success in either place. Congregations came expecting a Christmas Carol service and were sometimes disappointed when they discovered that it was something different. It was too much to ask the choirs to learn the music for two carol services within a month of one another.

At Halling, we hosted the local primary school carol concerts. It's a big Church, but they needed two sittings to include all the parents & grandparents as well as the children. On Advent 4 at 3.00 pm at Halling we combined the Christmas Carol service with a Christingle, a Nativity Play and the Blessing of the Crib. The Cuxton Nativity Play was devised, rehearsed and acted by the Sunday School. At Halling, we had a weekday after school club for primary school children & an earlier group for pre-schools. We drew on these for the Nativity Play, but there came a time when they ceased to meet and we made the Nativity Play an impromptu event, inviting children & adults from the congregation on the day to put on one of our costumes & to act out the story. It provoked some merriment, when the lady playing Mary, without thinking, placed a cushion under her robe before we had got to the Annunciation.

I used to invite the pre-schoolers to come to the last of their meetings before Christmas dressed as characters from the Nativity & I would include them in my narration of the story. One year, a boy came dressed as a dinosaur. So I started the story, "Once there were dinosaurs in what we now call the Holy Land. Then millions of years later..." The next year he beat me. He came dressed as a Pokémon!

I really committed a faux pas one year. When we were going through the children's birthdays on 6th December, I remarked that it was the feast of St Nicholas, the real Father Christmas. They asked me if it was Father Christmas' birthday. I replied, honestly but thoughtlessly, that it was more likely to be the day

of his death. Stunned silence! Thankfully, cognitive dissonance then seized the children's collective consciousness and I didn't have to try to explain further. Maybe I could have referred to Nicholas' alleged (but improbable) connection with the Council of Nicaea and tried to elucidate what the Creed means by homoousios with the Father & incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary!]

Once, we attempted to set the Nativity Play at Cuxton as though those events were happening in our village in our own time. That was interesting and fun. When we tried to set the Nativity in the context of contemporary Halling, someone commented that the only part he found hard to believe was that they got a mobile connection in the upper village!

Over the more recent years, a Christmas Tree Festival was held at Halling. Individuals and village organisations decorated a tree and set it up in the Church. We probably got about twenty trees, often imaginatively dressed. The Church is then open for visitors for a number of days. Cuxton Church was generally open in the daytime when there was a Rector living in the neighbouring Rectory, but Halling Church was mostly locked. So a few days in which people can just come in to look & pray is a good thing.

Christmas Communion at Halling was at 8.00 am. We tried alternating the 8.00 & 9.30 times between the two villages, but 9.30 was better supported at Cuxton and 8.00 at Halling. So we stuck with that pattern.

St Andrew's Day 2024 was my 70th birthday. So, on account of the application of the letter of the law, I had to retire on that day. Lay people themselves with the support of retired clergy were able to do pretty well everything which we have done normally at Christmas. In future years, there may be new ideas and new ways of celebrating these eternal Truths to which the Churches in Cuxton & Halling have both borne witness since soon after St Augustine brought the Gospel to Kent.

Roger Knight

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On the Merging of Seasons

As I write this, it's the first week of Advent and I will be setting off soon for the Deanery Chapter Christmas lunch. And that of course encompasses the clash of seasons.

When I was young, the Christmas tree didn't go up and get decorated until Christmas Eve, and we observed that tradition in our house until relatively recently. Last year, there was very little choice left of trees when we went to the garden centre in mid-December. And the decoration happens on when a grandchild is available to do it. It's a long time since I have bought new decorations for the tree, except for the archbishops – I have a collection of four now, and I hang them every year, unless I have a particular objection to one or other of them, when he might remain in the drawer that year.

And I do dislike the enforced jollity and materialism of the secular celebration. I'm a bit of a Bah Humbug. There's an Eastern European busker who plays Jingle Bells incessantly on his accordion. I hate Jingle Bells, except when my 7-year-old grandson is picking out the tune on his guitar, because it's the first tune he has learnt.

In parish life, carol services happened throughout Advent, and a Christmas tree was necessary. I soon gave up resisting – giving people a moment of joy and a door into the Christmas story was more important, even in the 'wrong' season.

I appreciate the spirituality of Advent, a time of waiting and preparation, of fasting and repenting, of reflecting on the Big Questions. And I have worked hard at that over many years. But now in old age, my

spirituality is changing and I need to let go of the effort and just be and just listen. I am happy to let the rest of the world get on with whatever works for them.

Meg Gilley

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My First Christmas as a Retired Bishop



Christmas 2024 marked a profound transition in my life—the first I celebrated as a retired bishop. After decades of shepherding congregations, leading liturgies, and walking alongside others in their spiritual journeys, I found myself in a quieter, more contemplative space. The shift was both gentle and jarring, filled with moments of deep gratitude and unexpected longing.

For many years, Christmas was a season of sacred responsibility. From Advent preparations to midnight Mass, my calendar was always filled with pastoral duties. I was immersed in the rhythm of the Church, guiding others through the mystery of the Incarnation. Last year, however, I experienced Christmas from the pew rather than the pulpit. Sitting among the congregation, I felt a mixture of humility and joy. It was a blessing to receive the Word and Sacrament without the weight of leadership, yet I couldn't help but feel a twinge of absence—of not being the one to proclaim, "Unto us a child is born."

The slower pace allowed me to reflect more deeply on the meaning of Christ's birth. Without the demands of scheduling and sermon writing, I found myself drawn into the simplicity of the nativity story. I spent more time in prayer, in silence, and in reading Scripture—not for preaching, but for personal nourishment. The image of the Christ child, vulnerable and radiant, spoke to me in new ways. I saw in Him not only the Saviour of the world but also a gentle invitation to rest, to trust, and to be renewed.

Family time took on a new richness. In previous years, my presence at home during Christmas was often brief and hurried. This year, I lingered. I listened more, laughed more, and allowed myself to be fully present. Sharing meals, stories, and traditions with loved ones reminded me that ministry continues in the everyday—through kindness, patience, and love.

I also felt the absence of my former clergy and people from Wakefield. Their faces, voices, and stories came to mind often. I missed the warmth of familiar greetings, the joy of seeing children in nativity plays, and the solemn beauty of candlelit services. Yet I was comforted by the knowledge that the Church continues, that others now carry the mantle, and that the Spirit moves through new hands and hearts.

Through Christmas, I learned that retirement is not an end, but a new beginning. It is a time to rediscover the essence of faith, to deepen one's relationship with God, and to embrace the sacredness of rest. I am grateful for the 42 years I served as deacon, priest and bishop, and I am equally grateful for this new season of life—one not marked by titles or tasks, but by grace, reflection, and quiet joy.

Tony Robinson was ordained in 1982 and served in the diocese of Leicester for 12 years before becoming Archdeacon of Pontefract in 1997 and then as a bishop in the diocese of Wakefield between 2003 and his retirement in 2024.

Kindly submitted by George Nairn-Briggs, who was Dean/Provost of Wakefield Cathedral between 1997 and 2007, this article first appeared in the publication *Together*

An Alternative view of the ‘Twelve Days of Christmas’.

On the twelfth day of Christmas,

My Archdeacon gave to me:

12 Preachers Preaching

11 People Praying

10 Organs playing

9 Choirboys singing

8 Bells a’ringing

7 Synods meeting

6 Servers serving

5 Rural Deans

4 Faculties

3 PCCs

2 Churchwardens

And a Vicar in a Vestry.

Bruce Carlin

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The Bleak Midwinter

We used to spend part of every summer on Utö, an island in the Stockholm Archipelago. Clustered around the little harbour is a group of buildings known as *Gruvan*, the closest thing on the island to a town. Where the road begins to slope down towards this settlement, there’s a squat stone building half in a clearing, half under the pines. As we cycled past, my wife would point and call, ‘*Likhuset!*’ – literally, ‘the corpse house’ – the building where the bodies were kept, until the Spring thaw, of people who had died during the winter. When we’d propped our bikes against the Post Office and were lounging by the quayside with our sticky buns, the children would probe their mother’s scant knowledge of the *likhus*, oblivious, in the warm sun and the familiar surroundings, of the icy splinter that touches the adult soul whenever we pass it.

The Utö mortuary sometimes comes to mind when we sing *In the Bleak Midwinter* – ‘Earth stood hard as iron,/Water like a stone’. The windowless, whitewashed walls, inscrutable as snow. It’s always summer when we see it. If ‘Angels and archangels/May have gathered there’ they’d have been wearing shorts, squatting by the fire pit, fizzing open cans of lager pulled out of the cooling sea.

How nimbly the inattentive mind flits between seasons. But whatever the weather in my head, the Jesus of Europe is born indisputably on a winter’s day. Not a 2020’s winter – warm, grey, damp, like a veteran’s greatcoat. But a Breugel winter, steaming breath and freezing fingers.

Pieter Breugel the Elder's *Adoration of the Magi in Snow* is the art world's earliest White Christmas. Made in 1563, at the beginning of The Little Ice Age, it was also one of the first paintings to depict falling snow. Some 60 years later, Lancelot Andrewes wrote of the Magi in his Christmas Day sermon: 'A cold coming they had of it ...', words T S Eliot lifted for his own *Journey of the Magi*, written in 1927 (when 'on Christmas day through Boxing day, a blizzard raged in Southern England, from Kent to Cornwall. 1-2ft of snow fell, with 20ft drifts on Salisbury Plain,' notes *Netweather*, an online survey of British winters).

The Little Ice Age lasted 150 years, so was long past by the time of Dickens, who's generally credited with the crisp cold, cosy Christmases we're familiar with today. The 19th century did have its own notorious snowfalls – one on Christmas Day 1836 (*Netweather*). This, Dickens' 24th Christmas, may have been on his mind when he published *A Christmas Carol*, in 1843. And it would have impressed itself on 7-year-old Christina Rossetti. She published *In the Bleak Midwinter* (originally entitled *A Christmas Carol*) in 1872.

My birthday, Christmas Day 1956, is unremarked on *Netweather*. But I was 7 myself in 1962, 'a famous winter ... Late December (commencing Boxing Day: the start of the bitter cold) saw blizzards in Southern England'. The bathroom plumbing burst; we were washed in a tin tub in front of the fire. Ice on the



windows for weeks. We sang carols for the patients lining the hospital corridors. Coming home, I looked up and saw for the first time the brittle, hard depth of night, the stars like frost. The 'worst time of the year to take a journey ...' wrote Andrewes, 'the ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in the very dead of winter.' For all the softness of the snow, the world is stony hard. Even the daylight. Cold has a hardness all its own.

Pieter Breugel the Elder – *Adoration of the Magi in Snow* (detail)

'A hard time we had of it,' writes Eliot. Breugel places the Holy Family right at the edge of his panel, stretching the bounds of our credulity to admit them. The infant God is within millimeters of being offstage altogether. Nothing like Just Follow the Waitrose Van to the Glittering Lights for a Warm and Slippered

John Lewis Christmas. And you wonder, after all their hazard and toil, just how welcome the Magi's' gifts might have been.

Today they come in boats. We reject their gifts. And tell them we're full up.

In the summer – the day-trippers queuing at the Bakery, a boat's small motor, crossing the harbour – it's not difficult to imagine the Spring thaw, the ground yielding to the spade. The opening up of the mortuary and the procession to the churchyard. There, the breeze comes off the sound, filters through the alder trees, stirs the dry grass where are buried the ashes of my parents-in-law. There, Incarnation and Resurrection actually sound like plausible concepts.

In the winter I've visited Utö just once. I had to pass the mortuary to get to the ferry stage. Rime coated the metalwork of the great, black door. Frosted scraps of broken web hung from the frame. In such bleak, hard, cold, the imagination could summon no kind of process at all – not even the interment of the deceased.

Here, where the ground can't be broken, even for the dead, is an image of the utter impenetrability that can afflict the human heart. Here, in the obscure corner of a painting of falling snow, Christina Rossetti's carol invites us to bring our love.

Robin Isherwood worked as a vicar in Cheshire and as an almshouse chaplain in London before retiring to Frome.

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Book Review:

'From Witness To Compassion: The Stations of The Cross' By Kevin Parkes

Over the centuries a wide range of activities have been developed and used by Christians to mark their keeping of Lent, Holy Week and Easter. Shrove Tuesday's Pancakes, receiving the Sign of the Cross on Ash Wednesday, fasting, giving something up such as alcohol or chocolate, charitable giving, making one's confession, are just some that we are familiar with.

For many people to focus on the Cross itself is enhanced by praying the Stations of the Cross. These have



historically been offered to recall and reflect on our Lord's passion. History tells us that the traditional 14 stations are found on the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, where they mark a spot where Jesus paused, stumbled, or spoke to someone on his way to the cross. The marking of the Stations of the Cross can be traced back to the fifth century, when churches started replicating holy places in their own contexts.

Kevin Parkes' thoughtful book, published by SLG Press – see <https://slgpress.co.uk/> – offers a reflection and question for prayerful consideration for each of the 14 stations which encourages one to

engage with the station itself and to encourage the reader's faithfulness and compassion. He reminds us

that we need time and patience and an ever-evolving view of what it means to love others and to respond to God in Christ in Holy Week.

A strong theology of both creation and the incarnation undergird this book, with love being portrayed as being fully present to, and with, others and accompanying them in the midst of suffering. Christ is the one who utterly identifies with people in their difficulties. As the introduction says, "To walk this way with Christ is to recognize that his suffering is not an ancient tragedy, but a present mystery: unfolding still in those who are forgotten, displaced, exploited, or afraid". As part of our call to love as he loved, we need to develop and strengthen his demeanour of gentleness and reverence towards other people.

I can thoroughly recommend this thoughtful and thought-provoking interpretation of the Stations of the Cross. In a time of considerable suffering across the world in both those places that make the headlines such as Ukraine and Gaza, and those that don't such as Haiti, this book offers the reader much helpful material to remind us of the cost of compassion and love and of the need to remain faithful.



On page 34 we are invited to "walk on this way not once a year, but each day: learning to find Christ where the world would least expect him; learning to love where hope seems most hidden; and learning, finally, that every road if walked in mercy, becomes a way of the Cross and a way toward new life".

Kevin Parkes was ordained in 1988 and served in a number of parochial, diocesan and chaplaincy roles before his retirement in 2025. He leads retreats and is a trained psychotherapist.

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Book Review: In-Between Girl by Sheelagh Aston. The First in The Birchwood Series.

Available at Amazon, Kindle Unlimited and bookshops.

This interesting and compelling book explores, with both depth and a light touch, a range of themes related to faith, values, choices, and relationships.

The heroine Hannah, who is part of the Amish community, is at the time in her life when she needs to decide if it is right for her to be baptised and fully commit to the Amish beliefs and way of life or engage fully with the broader American culture.



Her world is thrown into disarray by a serious crime against her best friend Grace, in which Hannah has inadvertently become involved. Many in her community take against her, and she and they have to engage deeply with what forgiveness can both mean for them, and require of them, in very extreme times. She is reminded that her faith teaches that "Acceptance and forgiveness were the paths to wholeness. Hatred, revenge, selfish desires, and all their related allies were to be resisted." (p.130)

Hannah comes to learn the importance of discernment as she realises that amongst her family, friends, and work colleagues, all is not necessarily what it seems, amid the complexities and challenges of trying to discern the truth.

All the characters and scenarios are well drawn, especially as the book moves towards its dramatic and exciting conclusion. Of note is the depiction of the quiet dignity of the Amish community, and how their faith is at the heart of their identity, not least when it comes under extreme pressure.

There are some adept and delightful descriptions including this one, to give just one example, “If the morning had crawled by, the afternoon passed with the speed of a slug”. (p.251).

Despite all the difficulties that come her way and her need to navigate through a challenging and at times dangerous world, Hannah is an utterly credible and likeable heroine. The demands of family, considering what it might mean for her to be part of a very traditional way of life, while trying to discern who is trustworthy, her feelings towards her contemporaries, all amidst some extremely demanding ethical choices, make this an engaging and exciting read, which I very highly recommend.

Charles Chadwick



Despite a severe loss of sight and diagnosed dyslexia, Sheelagh has been writing since she could hold a pen. She worked as a community worker before becoming an Anglican Vicar in 2005, serving in the northeast and west as a parish priest. She saw firsthand the challenges people faced with living in multi-cultural communities, out of which came the idea of Hannah’s story. Retired from ministry, she now divides her time between family, writing, quilting, and walking.

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See also www.sheelaghaston.com

Sheelagh was Vicar of St Silas Church, Blackburn, for eight years between 2016-24. In September 2019 Muslims and Christian came together to help Children in Need DIY SOS Big Build 2019, to convert the church’s parish hall into independent accommodation for 16-18 homeless young adults supported by Nightsafe with Darwen. Between 2010 and 2016 she was Priest-in-Charge of Oxclose Church, Washington, one of the first Local Ecumenical Partnerships in the country & Ecumenism Advisor for Durham Diocese.

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Reverse thoughts on Clergy and Trains – What about Trains and Clergy?

Further to previous contributions on this topic, and I agree there does seem to be some subliminal connection (for example, my brother-in-law, a retired Priest in Gloucester Diocese, is a model railway enthusiast and very knowledgeable about the railways in general) my experience was in a way the reverse.

I am a Chartered Engineer with a 40-year Railway Engineering career behind me. I think back to a period very early in my Priesthood (I was a mature ordinand and Self-Supporting Minister in Derby Diocese) when I had the privilege of having two other colleagues who were both Railway Engineers and Anglican Priests.

My Ministry in the workplace led to some interesting conversations with staff and colleagues as well as valuable pastoral support situations, including Occasional Offices. But when someone found out there were 3 of us “Railway Reverends” in the same Department (Mechanical and Electrical Engineers which dealt with trains) they somehow alerted the Railway Mission, and we ended up appearing in an article in that organisation’s house newspaper. Not long afterwards a similar article appeared in the local Derby Evening Telegraph.

They even took our photograph:



The Three Railway Reverends at the Railway Technical Centre, Derby, in 1991, featuring, L to R – The Rev'd Peter Owen-Jones, now retired in Winchester Diocese, the late Rev'd John Bishop of Derby Diocese and the late Rev'd Geoffrey Mitchell of Leicester Diocese. We were all graduates of the East Midlands Training Schemes (EMJOTS & EMMTC) and all employees of British Rail.

The point is that here there were three railwaymen who happened to be clergy as opposed to three clergy who happened to be interested in Railways and Trains.

I wonder if there are other professions with similar vocational outcomes.

Peter Owen-Jones served in a number of roles in the diocese of Derby between 1988 and his retirement in 20013.

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Repentance

Lord, when for joy I seek thy Presence,
Give me a godly sorrow for my sins;
Yea, and for my righteousness also.

O Lord that my sins may be covered,
Strengthen me to uncover them honestly, unsparingly,
before thine infinite love.

Let my heart with all its secrets
Be thrown as open to thee
As thy mercies to me.

May I never confess my faults
With no purpose to leave them
Nor make half-repentances, lest I make none.

Rather let me lift up to thee
All my prides and shames, the stubborn and the small,
The recurrent and the continuous,
That they may be buried low, and have no resurrection

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