

TOGETHER

The FREE magazine from the Diocese of Rochester | Issue 8 | Winter 2020 / 2021

GROW | ENRICH | RESOURCE

COVER STORY: CHURCHES PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS WITH A DIFFERENCE



GAMING
FOR GOD

COMFORT
AND JOY

BISHOP IN
PROFILE

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Poverty and Hope Appeal 2020



'Give me justice, O Lord my God, according to your righteousness' (Psalm 35:24)

With your support, women in Zimbabwe will be able to live the full and dignified lives they deserve.



Photo: USPG UK registered charity numbers Diocese of Rochester Poverty and Hope Appeal 249339 Christian Aid 1105851 and company number 5171525 USPG 234518 Church Mission

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CONTENTS

'Tis the season for twinkling lights and the warm, soft glow of lighted candles.

This year, however, such seasonal imagery is bitter-sweet. After a year of uncertainty, loss, tears, frustration, and fatigue, we need the hope at the centre of the Christmas story - of a baby born to be a light in the darkness - more than ever.

In this edition, therefore, I hope you will find much to bring you 'comfort and joy'.

In **Focus On**, we share details of the Church of England's Advent and Christmas campaign (pg 14) and explore how local churches are preparing for a very different Christmas (pg 8-11).

We top the leader board with our Gaming Vicar (pg 12) and wave a fond farewell to our retiring Bishop, in a special profile interview (pg 18).

In **People**, you are sure to be uplifted by Mandeep's inspiring journey to faith, while in **Headspace**, you'll find comfort for your mind and soul as we highlight some key resources to support your personal and spiritual well-being.

As we look together with hope and expectancy to 2021, may I wish you peace and joy this Christmas.

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INSIDE TRACK

4-7 Latest news

FOCUS ON

- 8 Preparing for a different Christmas
- 12 Gaming for God
- 14 5 ways to find Comfort & Joy
- 18 A Bishop in Profile

HEAD SPACE

- 16 Big Issue: How can we have failed to see and to hear?
- 21 Resources: Your Wellbeing

DON'T MISS

22 Top Upcoming events

PEOPLE

- 24 One to One: Beverley Ejimofo
- 26 Everyday Faith: Mandeep Dhindsa



ORDINATIONS GO AHEAD

A former children's nurse, founder of a charity, ukelele player, and barrister were among the 21 men and women ordained as deacons and priests into the Diocese of Rochester in September.

Due to the restrictions, the numbers of those who were able to attend the services was very restricted.

However, as in previous years, most of the services were live streamed, particularly to allow friends and family unable to attend to be part of these special occasions.

Speaking at the ordinations of those being priested at

St George, Beckenham and St Andrew, Paddock Wood, Bishop Simon Burton-Jones said:

"Though your ordination as priests will always be linked to the virus, do not be defined by it. As priests, you are viral with the Holy Spirit. The office you are assuming has status, though we should not become self-regarding, because it exists to give clarity and focus to your influence."

Meet one of our new deacons, Beverley Ejimofo, in our One-to-One interview on pg 24.



PLATT PUPILS SUPPORT COMMUNITY

Platt Church of England Primary School is supporting its local Foodbank, The Church of The Good Shepherd, Borough Green, during the pandemic with a new monthly Foodbank Friday. The children are also supporting the local care home by fundraising for a plant for each resident's room as a gift, plus older students are holding online poetry sessions and shared reading.



ACCOLADE FOR BEXLEY VICAR

Fr Mark Blakely, Vicar of Holy Trinity, Lamorbey, was 'humbled' to receive an award from the Mayor, for his services to the community during lockdown. Mark said: "I hope that my receiving this award can in some way be a shared recognition of the loving presence of the parishioners of Lamorbey and churches in Sidcup and beyond."



LOLLIPOP LYNN

It's not every day that your new lollipop lady turns out to the local vicar. But that's just what has happened in Langton Green where Lynn Trainor, Vicar of All Saints Church, has donned her high vis in the name of road-safety. "All the waves and cheery 'good mornings'. It is impossible not to beam from ear to ear. I haven't smiled so much since my wedding day!"



MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

The first batch of Clergy and Community Mental Health First Aiders have been trained thanks to a collaboration with Mid Kent Mind and the Community Engagement Social Action team. The Mental Health First Aid Course aims to give those involved in community hubs and churches the skills to better care for people with poor mental health whom they welcome.

CHURCH HOSTS NEW WALK-IN COVID TESTING CENTRE

A new walk-in Covid-19 testing centre has opened in the hall of Christ Church, Luton in Chatham.

The testing centre is being operated by the Department for Health and Social Care in partnership with security company G4S.

For the Rev Andrea Leonard, Priest-in-Charge of Christ Church, Luton, and the Parochial Church Council (PCC), this was a ministry to the community that they knew they had to be involved with:

“Fifty-per cent of people in Luton do not have their own car but we were hearing of people being offered tests miles away. We knew that this was something we had to do as an act of love for our community.”

Christ Church is built into a hillside, which means the main

worship area is on the top floor and can be accessed completely separately to the hall. It means there is no risk of cross-contamination from people coming to the church for private prayer and those coming for tests.

Caroline Clarke, Community Engagement and Social Action (CESA) Team Lead for the Diocese of Rochester said:

“Here is yet another of our churches that said ‘yes’ to meeting a vital need in their local area, to walking alongside them and showing, through their actions, the love of Christ.”

Anyone requiring a test should visit the NHS website here or call 119.



DELIGHT AT GOVERNMENT GRANT TO PRESERVE CHURCH HERITAGE

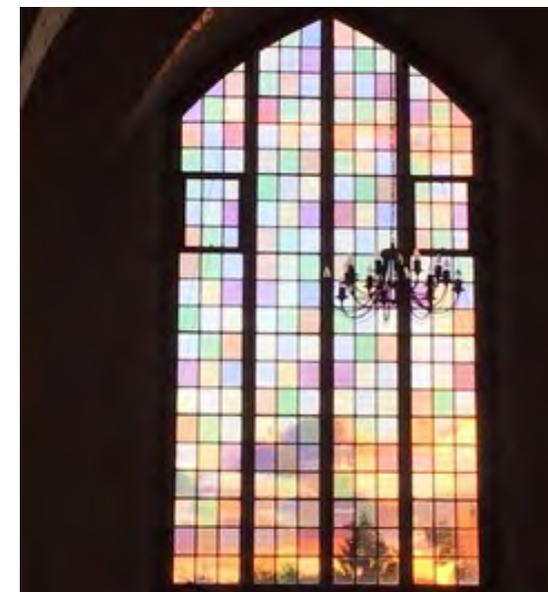
Two churches within the Diocese are set to receive almost £155K worth of funding between them as part of the Government and Historic England’s Heritage Culture Recovery Fund.

All Saints’ Church in Orpington has been awarded £57,000 to remedy problems causing water penetration around the windows. At St Botolph’s Church in Northfleet the £97,000 grant means that repairs to the Chancel roof and south aisle buttresses, can take place, enabling them to further use the church building for community use.

Both churches are delighted:

“This money is a welcome move from the Government and Historic England which will allow All Saints’ Church to continue to be the centre of the community in Orpington, as it has been for the last 1,000 years.” (The Rev George Rogers).

Rev Cyril Showers, Priest in Charge at St Botolph’s, and the PCC of Northfleet & Rosherville parish said: “Our thanks go to Sarah Anderson, Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) Secretary, and John Bailey, Architect at Thomas Ford & Partners, for all their guidance and support.”



Sarah Anderson said: “I am delighted for both churches. The DAC has moved quickly to sort out approvals for the repairs, to help the work be completed by the deadline of 31 March 2021, enabling both churches to be wind- and water-tight in the future.”

The Church of England has published a landmark set of resources to help individuals, parishes, and dioceses reflect on our shared humanity and sexual identity.

The product of three years’ work by more than 40 people, Living in Love and Faith includes a 480-page book, a series of films and podcasts, a course, and an online library of other publications.

They follow an appeal by the House of Bishops to the whole Church of England to participate in learning together, using the resources for open, honest and gracious discussion, listening and learning.

All the resources can be found on the Living in Love and Faith Learning Resource Hub



LIVING IN LOVE & FAITH

It is expected that this period of church-wide learning and engagement will take place during 2021. This time of discernment and decision-making will be brought to a conclusion in 2022 when it will be put before General Synod.

Find out more about Living in Love and Faith and how our Diocese plans to support conversations [here](#)



SHARING 'COMFORT AND JOY' AS CHURCHES PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS WITH A DIFFERENCE

From online carol services and nativity trails, to meditations and 'at home' seasonal packs, churches across the Diocese are preparing for an Advent and Christmas like no other.

Advent is the traditional four weeks of spiritual preparation and waiting before Christmas. It begins this year on 29 November.

While it is still not clear what the precise restrictions might be at Christmas itself, gatherings are likely to be smaller and most of us are much more likely to be at home.

Many churches will be taking their traditional Christmas services online, as well as organising a myriad of other creative and Covid-safe ways to help share the Christmas message.

King Charles the Martyr in Tunbridge Wells is planning to engage people both on and offline, as the Rev Laurence Powell explains:

"On Advent Sunday, we'll be launching our Advent Calendar. Each day throughout Advent we will release a video on Facebook and on Youtube of a pre-recorded piece of music, performed by our choir before lockdown, followed by a prayer for the day.

"It's a simple idea, but we think it will be a lovely way to share this season of preparation with others."

The online Advent calendar will be complemented by a physical book of prayers which will be delivered to all those within the church who do not have access to the internet, so they can still be connected.

The church is also working closely with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, The Forum music venue, and other local businesses and organisations to see if it is possible - restrictions permitting - to hold their Christmas Eve nativity service on the Common opposite the church.

Over at St Michael and All Angels, Wilmington in Dartford, they have chosen to engage the community with a trail of 'Advent Windows'.

On each day of Advent, a new window will be lit up

in the parish which will be decorated in a creative and seasonal way. A list of all the streets where the windows will light up will be made available, but the house number not given.

The Rev Carl Chambers, Vicar of St Michael and All Angels, says:

"We hope that people will enjoy the chance to walk around the parish and spot the windows which will be 'lit up' for certain hours of the evening."





ST PETER AND ST PAUL, EDENBRIDGE

At St Peter and St Paul, Cudham, and St Mary, Downe, near Biggin Hill, among a number of plans, they are organising a Geocache Posada - a Posada is a tradition originating from Hispanic countries which sees figures from the nativity story travel around different households in the community and stay there for one night.

The geocache is a twist on the tradition, which will invite locals to use google map locations to search for nativity figures placed around the local area.

Meanwhile at St Mary and St Barnabas, Gillingham, the Rev Liz Cox, says their plans for a 'virtual Christingle' will engage the many schools in the two parishes - a Christingle is a symbolic object, usually made with an orange, candle, and sweets, to help tell the Christmas story:

"We are going to make a short YouTube video and give it to the schools along with a bag for every child containing the things they will need to make their own Christingle which they can either do in the classroom or at home."

Animals are getting in on the action at St Peter and St Paul, Edenbridge, where they have adapted their usual nativity to a filmed version. Family 'bubbles' will play parts of the nativity in and around the town; this will then be edited together and interspersed with carols from the church's junior choir.

This Christmas is going to be especially difficult for many, perhaps due to loneliness, isolation, loss or deprivation. So, alongside worship and prayer, churches will be bringing hope to their communities through their community engagement, just as they have throughout the pandemic.

At St Francis, Strood, their annual Christmas Hamper giving will still take place, which will see a lovingly packed hamper of goodies distributed to vulnerable households across the areas.

The Rev Sharon Copestake, Vicar of St Francis, said: "We are currently taking referrals for those locally who are in need. Last year over 200 people received items from the church on behalf of members of the community who had donated items. We are so grateful."

Comfort and Joy



From community larders and prescription runs, to befriending schemes, mental health walks and outreach to care homes, churches have been walking alongside their communities as living beacons of hope throughout the pandemic.

The Place of Welcome at St Augustine, Gillingham is one of 17 hubs and cafes, supported by the Diocese's Community Engagement and Social Action team, that has continued its work.

"For me, the Place of Welcome is about hope, hospitality and support." says Andrew Gray, who runs the community project at St Augustine. "We wanted to use the church as a centre from which to address isolation, loneliness, and health issues locally. We have not let the pandemic deter us."

The team held weekly Place of Welcome events via Zoom from March until July and then in the Summer they ran a Chatty Church outside.

"We started the hub again in September. It was and is humbling to see how many people have come along.

We've heard laughter, the buzz of conversations – friends reunited. We've seen new skills being taught, and another charity begin working with us who support young mums.

"One person commented to me that 'The Place of Welcome gives people comfort, especially if they are having a bad day'."

Look out for our 'Comfort and Joy – Beacons of Hope' films which will run throughout Advent on our social media channels, sharing more stories of how churches are bringing practical support on the ground in their local areas.

- Find out more about the Church of England's national Advent and Christmas Campaign called [Comfort and Joy on pg 14](#)
- Explore what your local church is offering on and offline this Christmas, visit: www.achurchnearyou.com
- All the events mentioned will be subject to Covid-19 restrictions at the time so please check in advance to avoid disappointment.





GAMING FOR GOD

The Rev Simon Archer, Vicar of All Saints, Belvedere, has found that his love of online gaming has taken him to a whole new level of online ministry.

Online Gaming is when people experience playing a computer game together through the internet - they might be a group of local friends or not know each other at all.

It is estimated that there are around 20 million people in the UK who play online video games, and that there are now more than 2.5 billion active gamers around the world.

"I've always loved computer games. I started with Pong, those two little white rectangles bouncing a small square at each other! It progressed to a Spectrum 48k in the early 80's, Sega, Nintendo, PC, and then a string of Xboxes."

A couple of months into the first lockdown and Simon was looking for something to do with some of the spare time he had in the evenings with fewer meetings to attend. A cancelled holiday due to the crisis also landed the family with a little money. While his wife updated her camera, Simon bought a gaming PC.

"There was still a lot to learn about cameras, software,

microphones, and many other skills needed but I thought it would make for a good hobby and a real challenge. I am a geek and gadgets and computers are my thing, so why not?"

Fast forward a few months and he is now the "Vicar of Facebook Gaming" aka "Vicarious BIG", with a few hundred followers and viewers each time he goes live:

"There was always something in the back of my mind that this could be a genuine ministry. About 80% of my followers are men between 25-45. I knew I could reach a disconnected group who were very much connected online.

"In the few months I have been doing this I have teamed up with pastors, ministers and Christians from all over the world. We've chatted whilst playing games and talked about our faith watched by people of many faiths and no faith. I have played with other friends, viewers and followers. I've made many new friends and the community is growing every single day."

Simon began to include a feature where people can type '!prayer' into the chat and his 'bot' replies to let them know that he will be praying for them. He then prays for them after the stream:

"I don't preach, but people ask deep questions and I reply honestly and reference scripture if it's appropriate.

I don't have parishioners, but I offer support and care when I can."

Simon says that his availability online has given people the opportunity to reach out.

"While in another community forum on Facebook, I received the news that one of the members had had a heart attack. I was asked whether I would pray for him, which I did.

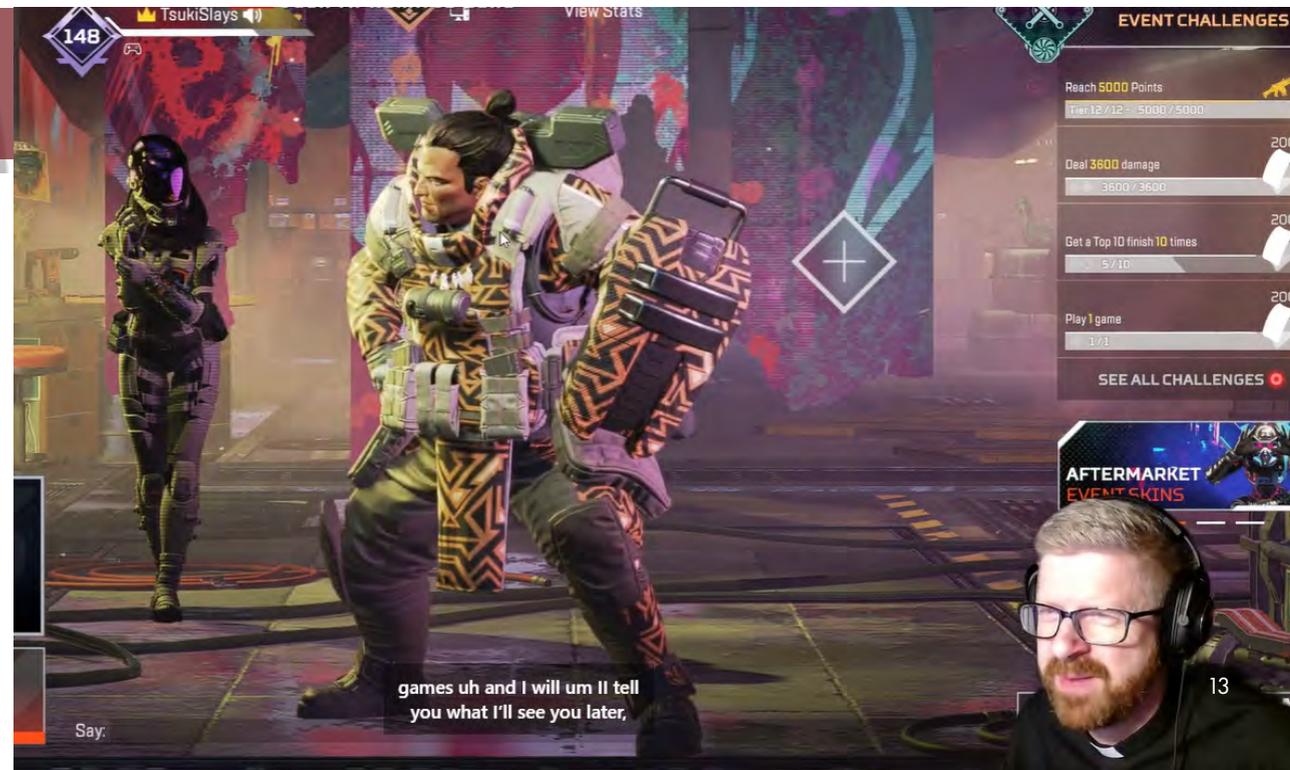
"Not long after, the person who had been ill was in my chat, and he let me know he was on the road to recovery and thanked me. It's not the only example but it is a good one of how my availability has offered some a means to reach out."

So, could this become a full-blown ministry for Simon?

"This remains a hobby, but it is certainly a ministry. I do it in my own time, but I enjoy it and it enriches my life. It will never likely grow my church, but it is another chip out of the barriers people have put up between themselves and the Church.

"Am I called by God to a ministry of playing and streaming video games? Yes, I think I am."

You can find Simon's gaming stream online here: www.facebook.com/gaming/VicariousBIG or on twitter: www.twitter.com/VicariousBIG



5 ways to find Comfort and Joy this Christmas

It's been a tough year, but Christmas is most definitely NOT cancelled. The hope we find in the story of a baby, born to save us and to bring light to a dark world, is more vital than ever.

This year the Church of England is inviting everyone to find Comfort and Joy this Christmas.

Here's how you can get involved.



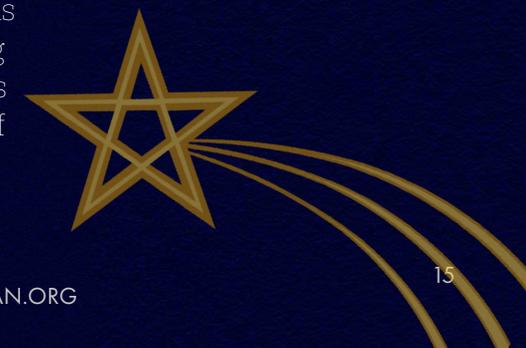
1 Explore the Comfort and Joy campaign: Visit the [Church of England website](#) to view all the Comfort and Joy materials. There will be weekly reflections published on social media and available by email and app.

2 Countdown to Christmas: Advent is the four weeks of spiritual preparation before Christmas. [Download the Advent countdown calendar](#) and join in with the activities as we wait, and remember the Comfort and Joy that Jesus brings to us all.

3 Experience Advent at home: Join Canon Gordon Giles, Canon Chancellor at Rochester Cathedral, as, with the help of some comfortingly familiar seasonal objects and past-times, he guides us through Advent. Follow the Diocese of Rochester on Facebook (@CofE Diocese of Rochester).

4 Get local: Find out what on and offline services and activities churches across the Diocese have to offer this Christmas by visiting [AChurchNearYou.com](#) - read more about some of their plans on pg 9-11.

5 Not online? No problem: Daily Hope is a free number (0800 804 8044) offering music, prayers and reflections as well as full worship services from the Church of England at the end of a telephone line.



HOW CAN WE HAVE FAILED TO SEE AND TO HEAR?

In October, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse published its report into the Anglican Church. It found that the Church of England had failed to protect children and young people from sexual predators within its ranks. In this comment piece, **Archdeacon Julie Conalty, the Archdeacon of Tonbridge and Bishop's Lead for Safeguarding**, says it is time for us to start calling out dangerous and corrupt culture within the church.

The IICSA report into the Anglican Church highlights how our neglect of the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of children and young people in favour of protecting our reputation was in conflict with our mission to love and care for the vulnerable. I would add that it reveals how the Church has failed to model itself on the Christ who stood with the marginalised and the victims, saw those who were overlooked or shunned and included those who had been shut out.

But I knew all this. From my own experience in the church, from reading reports and following inquiries, from engaging with survivors. So, it is a relief to see it all set down on paper – or at least some of it. There will be more; there is inevitably more that has not yet come into the light.

Of course, there has been progress over recent years. The report acknowledges this. We, in the Church, see the rewritten guidance, the ever-developing training modules, the increasing investment in the national safeguarding structures and the growth of the safeguarding teams in individual dioceses. We see the recent launch of the 'Safe Spaces' project and the pilot reparation scheme.

But how can we have moved so slowly on all of this? Why did so few people question or challenge? Why could we not contemplate the ability of our colleagues (lay and ordained) to perpetrate abuse? The Chichester/Peter Ball investigation report highlights a number of concerns about the culture of the Church of England – our clericalism, 'tribalism', naivety, concern for reputation and our culture of fear and secrecy

regarding sexuality. Pretty massive stuff. The IICSA report generously sets out some of the recent initiatives to improve the culture of the Church of England but to be honest they seem weak, especially given the size of the challenge.

So, I think we need to start calling out some of our dangerous and corrupt culture. I long to hear more prophetic voices in our church. I long to see some serious theological engagement with the issue of abuse in the church. I long, above all else, for us to be more Christlike. I want to see a true culture change that leads to authentic repentance where our attitudes and behaviour shift and where our practice improves not because we are told we need to do better but because we yearn to do better. I want us to hunger for justice and to work relentlessly and enthusiastically to make our churches safer places.

The IICSA report makes for very uncomfortable reading and that is helpful. It contains some important conclusions and recommendations that will assist the Anglican Church to improve its safeguarding arrangements. It challenges us to regain the trust of those who have been abused. Above all it sheds some much-needed light on things that many in the church have sought to keep hidden in darkness. Now it is time for us to open our eyes, to really see what is going on and what needs to be done and to move heaven and earth to make the crucial changes.

By the Ven Julie Conalty, the Archdeacon of Tonbridge and Bishop's Lead for Safeguarding

IF YOU ARE AFFECTED BY THIS...

Anyone who is affected by the publication of the report, or who wants to talk to someone independently regarding a concern they have about something they have experienced in a church, now or in the past, can contact the Safe Spaces helpline, on 0300 303 1056 or email: safespaces@victimsupport.org.uk

Safe Spaces is an independent service supporting survivors of church-related abuse. Run by the charity Victim Support, it is funded by the Church of England together with the Catholic Church in England and Wales and the Church in Wales. It is free to access via telephone, email and web-chat. Visit www.safespacesenglandandwales.org.uk

The Diocese of Rochester's own [Safeguarding Team](#) can also be contacted on 01634 560 000 or their contact details can be found [here](#). Other organisations offering support can also be found on the national Church of England website [here](#).

If you are or someone else is in immediate danger, please call 999.



A BISHOP IN PROFILE

After 10 years as the Diocesan Bishop of Rochester, Bishop James Langstaff has announced his intention to retire in July next year. In this extended interview, he reflects on his time in the Diocese, on his wider ministry and some of the key highlights and challenges.

"I have been so pleased to be here and to have been part of the life and story of the Church within this Diocese, its mission and its Christian presence. I've hugely valued being able to be on the ground in our parishes, with our chaplains, in our mission initiatives, and not least with some of our community engagement.

"One of the highlights for me has been to see all those individuals who have responded to God's calling, whether through confirmation, or conversion, or in ordination or lay ministry in its many forms. To see people on a journey of discipleship is the most important thing of all and I've been really grateful to be part of that."

He says he is also hugely encouraged by the community work that is taking place:

"When you look at the partnerships we've formed with organisations like Home for Good, others around homelessness, around dementia care, around domestic violence, modern slavery, these are particular initiatives that we've taken as a Diocese to address some of the major issues within our society and to demonstrate that the church has a role there.

"I think that's something I look back on with a significant kind of satisfaction, if one's allowed to have that sort of thing."

Bishop James will have completed over 40 years of ministry by the time he retires, serving roles in Guildford, Birmingham, and Norwich, before coming to Rochester in 2010. But was he always destined for a career in the church?

"I was destined for a career in finance and business I think, that was probably what my father had in mind for me. And it was only, I think, when I stepped back from that and asked, well is this really right for me, and the influence of Christian friends and clergy when I was at university, which led to a sort of reassessment and this calling emerged at that stage."

It certainly been a diverse and interesting ministry. Bishop James has held some significant national portfolios including Bishop to Her Majesty's Prisons and as a Lords Spiritual, speaking in the House of Lords particularly on issues such as homelessness and criminal justice. Have there been times then, when he's particularly felt the guiding hand of God?

"My experience is that God often leads one in ways that you don't realise until after the event.

"It's not about a sudden revelation that a or b or c is the right thing, but it's actually as you reflect on where you are that you begin to see patterns and which you then understand as being God's guidance.

"So, for example, there had always been something prompting me towards ministry in a inner city environment. When my wife Bridget and I went up on holiday to Scotland, we would drive from where I was a curate through the centre of Birmingham. I remember looking to my right and seeing this area of high-rise tower blocks and thinking to myself, 'yeah but I'm not quite sure that urban.' That was precisely the parish we ended up in, just to the east side of the Aston Expressway.

"And I'm very clear that that was part of God's guidance that that's where we ended up for 11 years. So, it's through this combination of events, of people that you meet, of things that are said, of opportunities which open up, that I discern that call of God."

He also chaired the legislative process that led to the ordination of women bishops, and he admits that when the group first started to meet, he thought they would probably never get there.

But as this deliberately diverse group met over a number of months, in a pretty intensive way, somehow there emerged a desire to see a way through

"When we got to the final vote in General Synod, which took place in July at York, that was a huge moment."

Leaving at this unprecedented time, what is his message to the diocesan family and the wider community?

"It will be a leaving in a strange time because of this uncertainty and that the world is going to be different, therefore the life of the Church will be different. What I can say is that, even when we go through periods of significant change or uncertainty, the Church of God has been around for a long time. The structures may change, the outward expressions may change, the patterns may change, and of course, the people change but actually, at the end of the day, as we say quite often in our liturgies, God who calls you is faithful and that's a bedrock."

Information setting out the process and timetable for appointing Bishop James' successor will be announced by the Diocese of Rochester in due course.

Watch this interview in full on our [YouTube channel](#)



Given the challenging times we are living in with coronavirus, it's more important than ever that we take steps to support good mental health and well-being. Take a look at some of these resources below.



FINDING LIGHT IN THE DEEPEST DARK

Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries is offering a free resource this Christmas designed to encourage our faith at a time when it may feel most challenged. Called "Finding Light In the Deepest Dark" it offers an opportunity to reflect on 2020, to give and receive support, and to prepare for the Christmas season through Scripture, art, music, and dialogue.

Visit: www.sanctuarymentalhealth.org/uk



HEADSPACE BOOK

Fegans is a charity dedicated to working with young people to explore improvement in both mental and emotional health. In this motivational, journal-style book, young people are encouraged to start thinking about their own happiness. All proceeds from the sale of the book go directly to helping children through the Fegan's counselling services. (£5)

Visit: www.fegans.org.uk/product/headspace-book/



SUPPORTING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Available as a set of podcasts or in a printable booklet, this resource from the Church of England offers 13 daily mental health reflections to provide hope, reassurance and comfort.

Visit: www.churchofengland.org/resources/mental-health-resources/supporting-good-mental-health

Allowing ourselves space for prayer and reflection on the things which we encounter in our daily lives at this time of year can also be helpful for our spiritual and mental well-being.



AT HOME IN ADVENT

In his new book, 'At Home in Advent – A domestic journey from Advent to Epiphany', the Rev Canon Gordon Giles hopes to offer that space for contemplation.

"It feels like Advent began last March with the first lockdowns. There has been anxiety, doom and gloom, and expectation ever since. Recent talk of vaccines has given some hope in these darkest of days. These are Advent themes.

"We have been living Advent, not as a spiritual exercise, but as a living, breathing, dying, suffocating, real-life and death phenomenon. So maybe we don't need Advent this year? Oh yes, we do. We need it more than ever!

"We must watch and pray and we must not sleepwalk through these challenging, precious, profound times. There is much to learn and upon which to reflect."

We'll be sharing a series of videos inspired by the reflections from Canon Gordon Giles' book each week through Advent. Follow us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com).

You can purchase the book from the Bible Reading Fellowship [here](https://www.bible-reading-fellowship.org/)

TOP EVENTS NOT TO BE MISSED



CANTIACI VOCAL ENSEMBLE: ONLINE NINE LESSONS AND CAROLS SERVICE SUNDAY 20 DECEMBER, 6PM

This small 'one singer to a part' chamber choir, based in Pembury, is offering a festive treat with this recorded traditional service. 'Going live' on YouTube, it will include spoken contributions from Bishop Simon Burton-Jones and other local clergy. Donations welcome. Find out more at: www.cantiaci.org.uk/future-events



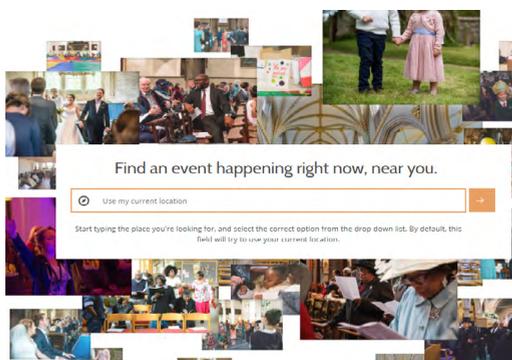
ST BENEDICT'S CENTRE, WEST MALLING

Need some quiet space? The [St Benedict's Centre](http://www.stbenedictscentre.org) is still offering a quiet place for guests. Enjoy a quiet room, comfy chair, beautiful grounds and hot drinks. Guests always welcome at St Benedict's: bookings@stbenedictscentre.org



ONLINE GUIDED RETREATS

For those who feel drawn to spending more time in prayer at this time, online guided retreats are available from the Diocese of Rochester's Spirituality Network until May 2021. Whether or not you have done anything like this before, if you would like to find out more, or to book a place, please contact the Rev Canon Susanne Carlsson susannecarlssons@hotmail.co.uk



COMFORT AND JOY AT A CHURCH NEAR YOU

Find out what services and activities are being offered by a church near you this Advent and Christmas. Visit www.AChurchNearYou.com and search via your postcode.



Rochester CATHEDRAL

ADVENT & CHRISTMAS AT ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL

2020 presents an opportunity for a new and varied Christmas offering from Rochester Cathedral

The season will begin with a modern take on a very traditional service: the Cathedral's Service for Advent will be live-streamed on Sunday 29 November at 4pm on their website, as well as over on their [Facebook page](#). The Cathedral will then share two opportunities to catch their much loved Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols on Monday 21 and Tuesday 22 December.

On Christmas Eve a Virtual Nativity will be available all day, to watch with your family.

THE ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL FAMILY-FRIENDLY CHRISTMAS TRAIL

If you happen to be in Rochester High Street this December, please join the Cathedral on an inspired Christmas Trail. There are twelve stations to discover, and at each you will find a QR code to scan with your phone. It will also be available on their [website](#).

THE ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL ONLINE ADVENT CALENDAR

Perfect for all the family, this low-calorie but rich-with-the-history-of-Christian-symbolism Advent Calendar will be available online from 1 December.

IN PERSON SERVICES

Services at the Cathedral will start with the Eucharist of Christmas Night and the Eucharist of Christmas Day, for which you will need to book free tickets via the Cathedral website [here](#)


 A portrait of Beverley Ejimofa, a Black woman with glasses and braided hair, wearing a black cardigan over a patterned top and a necklace with a circular pendant. The background is a blurred church interior with gold accents.

BEVERLEY EJIMOFO

Beverley Ejimofa is the new curate at St Mary, Shortlands, in Bromley. Born in Cardiff, South Wales, she trained in nursing and has worked in the Education and Social Services sectors. As one of our newest deacons, we caught up with her to find out what it is like to be ordained during a pandemic and her reaction to being the first black, female curate in Bromley.

What is a deacon?

When you are ordained, you serve a minimum of a year as a deacon. As a deacon, you can do everything that a priest would, but you do not offer absolution and you are not in charge of administering Holy Communion. It can be a distinctive ministry in itself. Being a deacon is really at the heart of the priestly role, as it is about serving the people. Even a bishop is still a deacon.

What was your reaction when you learnt that you were the first black, female curate in Bromley?

I was hugely surprised. On the one hand there is a great honour to that, but alongside is a certain amount of sadness. I think that the Church has acknowledged that there are issues around equality diversity and race, and I think that, in acknowledging that, there is a move to redress some of the imbalances.

What do you think needs to happen to improve the situation around Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic representation in the Church?

One of the most exhausting things sometimes is the fact that the victim is asked to be the educator. I think that white members of the Church, and of society in fact, need to do a little bit of research. There is a wealth of historical and current information out there on the impact and the outcome of racism. It's wonderful and affirming, if you can see that people are prepared to make an effort to learn and understand for themselves, moving away from the "tell us what to do" mentality.

What would you say to a black person who might be wondering if the Church of England can really be a place where they will feel welcomed?

I would say come on board. It is changing. It is getting better. I have had some excellent experiences in the Church of England, meeting caring, loving people who have been longing to be a part of the solution to the exclusion some black people have faced within the church, and they want

to see equality. No organisation is perfect but in my experience the church still offers a place to grow in faith and to experience Christ's love.

Is there anyone who has particularly inspired you on your journey of faith?

Definitely my parents. They were true Christian people - generous, kind and they lived what they believed. I remember my Dad saying to me to 'always remember where you've come from and always try to give back'. I have always tried to shape my life along those lines.

You were ordained right in the middle of a pandemic. What was that like?

I can remember the day before, having our temperatures taken, so it was right up to the wire as to whether it would go ahead. There were certainly a few tears shed during the service on the next day.

How do you like to relax?

My favourite Gospel singer is a man called Fred Hammond, so I listen to him a lot. But my big secret love is the band Madness. My daughter is really into them now as well and we have been off to concerts together, which is great fun.

Do you have any animals in your life?

Yes, I have got a cat called Coltrane who rules the roost!

Christmas will be different this year, but do you have any Christmas traditions?

Church first, we do the traditional Christmas, it is what I grew up with, so the turkey and the silly crackers - I like a good cracker! At St Mary's, we are having a large external nativity scene built, so whatever the restrictions, people in the parish will be able to walk, reflect and enjoy this beautiful display.

If you would like to explore how God might be calling you please visit: www.rochester.anglican.org/ministry/vocations/vocation-resources/



MANDEEP'S STORY

When Mandeep was baptised along with her two children at Christ Church, Chislehurst, she described it as 'the best day of her life'. It was the latest stage on her journey of faith which has at times been surprising and dramatic.

Growing up, my faith looked a lot different to now.

I was brought up in the Sikh religion and I was brought up to believe in one God. I had always felt from a young age that I had a relationship with God, but I didn't know Jesus.

I became a Christian five years ago when I was 43.

At the time, I was going through the most turbulent time in my life. My two-year old daughter had been diagnosed with a life-threatening heart condition and my mind was in complete and utter turmoil.

It was at this time of crisis that Jesus chose to make himself known to me; I wasn't looking for Jesus, I didn't know of Jesus.

Often at night I would look out of the window and look at the leaves on the trees. It was about 3 o'clock in the morning, and I was at a point of deep despair. I reached out to my father who had died when I was 12 and I said, 'Dad, please help.'

At that instant my vision just changed. My focus went from the trees outside, to a cross, that was suddenly formed by a pattern on the window. It was instant and completely involuntarily.

I was confused. I wasn't sure what it all meant; why had my focus changed just at the moment I had asked for help?

From that moment on, everything changed. I knew enough to know that the cross was connected to Christianity and so I started to go to church and look for more answers. I wanted to learn more about Jesus.

I didn't know what to expect, but the first day I decided

to attend a service - at Christ Church, Chislehurst, I received a warm welcome.

Each week I would sit in the front row, listening to the vicar. Sometimes I would arrive angry - I was so angry with God and I wanted to know what Jesus had to say to me.

Amazingly, there always felt like there was a message just for me and how I was feeling

I started to speak to more people, and I was given the Bible. I procrastinated about the Bible for some time as I wasn't sure where to start. But a friend encouraged me to just pick it up and start on the first page.

So that is what I did.

Everyone had gone to sleep, I put on a little torch and I just started to read. I read the first few pages and put it down. The moment I did so, I experienced a warm feeling that just grew throughout my entire body.

That was the first time that I think I experienced the love of Jesus Christ. That was the start of my journey and it's one that has continued and is now encompassing other members of my family.

I still have a lot to learn but what I've realised is that becoming a Christian doesn't mean life is going to be perfect, but what it does mean is that, even when things are difficult, you can turn to Jesus.

My family has experienced sadness and tragedy, but if anything, my faith has become stronger,

In times of joy Jesus is there with you too. Knowing that Jesus is walking alongside me and my family has transformed my life.

**God of comfort and joy,
May we know your
presence with us today
and bring your gentle,
joyful love to others,
this Christmas
and always.**

Amen



#ComfortAndJoy is the Church of England's 2020
Advent and Christmas campaign.

Find out more and explore free online services,
reflections and other resources at
www.churchofengland.org/ComfortAndJoy