



Priest in Charge Report for the Annual Meetings Reflections on the life of Severn Loop in 2023

As we look back over 2023, we are looking at the signs of God at work in our little patch of earth- signs that encourage us, and that help us to have an inkling about where we might be heading as the future unfolds. During our APCM meetings over the coming month (in our five PCCs), we will receive reports on the nuts and bolts of that in various aspects of our life together. But my job is to look at the big picture, the vision, where do we see hope, where are the challenges, where is Christ ministering and preparing the way?'

And as I look back, there is a real sense of the need to hold on to hope in changing, less predictable and more challenging circumstances. Our sodden fields are a kind of metaphor here- what we once took for granted is different, and getting harder to work with, but the life-giving power of God continues nevertheless- we may well have to adapt, we face a different landscape, but the reality of the life of love to which we are invited remains the same.

Following three rather muted pandemic years, in 2023 our worshipping life got back up to speed and more! I'm massively grateful to Joyce and Peter (who do so much), and to our churchwardens (without whom we really would be snookered), and to all of you- for the ways in which you help, support, pray for and participate in the mission of God. Thank you.

It's not about being busy, or what we 'do' as opposed to how we 'are', but it helps to get a bit of context so, in 2023, across Severn Loop we had:

- Around 255 Sunday Services.
- 50 Sunday Zoom services- each week at 6pm.
- 6 Forest Churches- Thank you to those who hosted them- at Huffley, Leaton Forest, Leaton Hall, Mission Church (bit of a cheat!), Dolly's Gate in Shrawardine, Shrawardine Church.
- 12 monthly communions at Isle Court Nursing Home.
- Around 200 home communion services and home/ hospital visits- the vast majority done by Joyce- with those who cannot get to church.
- One confirmation service with five candidates.
- Around nine services in church held for our local schools, and about 40 'Open the Book' worship assemblies across Bicton and Bomere Heath schools.

- 8 carol services and 10 Christmas services.
- 5 weddings.
- 11 baptisms (three of them from our weekly Coffee and Play group, and a good number of them who come to Forest Church).
- 36 Funerals and/or burials of ashes.

And that last number is an important one. 2023 began shrouded in sadness. By the end of March we'd done more funerals that we usually do in one year. Because of the overstretched nature of our public services, many of them were very emotionally charged, with questions hanging over what had happened. Some were of congregation members- friends of us all- and that too was so difficult. We had a hard time together, but it nevertheless remains an enormous privilege to be alongside people at times of grief, to witness to the ultimate triumph of hope over despair, and to help shape a focus for their mourning. Our open churchyards are important here ('open' just means we have burials)- in many ways they are our biggest mission field- I've had more conversations in those places than anywhere else. Our annual *Remembering with Love* service was very well attended, as was a new venture we tried- graveside memorial services at both Montford and Shrawardine. Those were outdoors, and lasted only about ten minutes, but in both cases people came from the community and valued the opportunity just to remember their loved one and to reengage with hope. Then finally, at Christmas we tried our version of *Light for a Loved One* at Bicton- a moving opportunity for people to remember those they love but see no longer.

As Spring turned to Summer there was an exciting, but also quite an exhausting (!) sense of waking up. The social whirl that characterises the life of country churches returned in its fullness! It's crucial to be a full part of the life of the community because that's where we build relationships, we built trust, and we witness to the Gospel in our attitudes, actions and presence.

So a whistle-stop tour- we had *Hymns and Pimm's* and a craft fair at Bicton; we had the return of the village fete at Fitz; we had a quiet day at Shrawardine and some amazing fundraisers for Montford and Shrawardine churches (including the brilliant Revue); we had coffee mornings and the Stepping Out Café; the Mission Church become a *Bake-Off* venue at the community fete; we had the harvest supper back at Leaton; the Christmas Tree Festival, the Severn Loop Coach Trip, the pantomime, the coronation celebrations, Fitz advent lunch, carol singing in the Red Lion Pub, 24/7 prayer rooms... and more. There was so much!

A highlight though, was the Severn Loop Summer Celebration- a service we held on Corpus Christi at Leaton, followed by drinks at Albrighton. Particularly humbling was the number of 'hidden hands'- I ordered 100 cards to write and thank people who helped keep our churches going- buildings, grounds and worship. 100 cards was not enough. By asking wardens for names, I discovered so many people I didn't know already, who do key things in the background- those who ring the bells, who cut

hedges, who wind the clocks, who paint the gates... we have so many people to thank, and being thankful is a way of showing God's love.

Aside from the things I've already mentioned, we tried a number of new ministries and events. We began a worship committee at Bicton School, and children from Bomere School now regularly come to the Stepping Out Café. We've also been in Bomere School to help them become a *Dementia Friendly* School. At Montford, the churchyard reflection stones have been really well appreciated. At Shrawardine and Bicton, we've had church buildings open to the public. That has been so well received- and the 'welcome' at Shrawardine- with water, snacks, puncture repair kits, picnic blankets and spare socks for walkers- is amazing. We've found too, that our relationship with Isle Court Nursing Home has grown deeper, and we are invited there more often. At Albrighton, we've rekindled our link with the hotel, and we are looking at building links with other wedding venues. We had carol services at Preston Gubbals and Battlefield, and at Battlefield we also put an empty tomb (it was a tent!) and prayer stations in the church for the reenactment weekend. As well as the wonderful seasonal choir at Montford, we're now adding in handbells, and are hoping to grow a team.

As we journey on through 2024, what are our prayers and hopes? Well, firstly we come with deep gratitude for all that God has done and continues to do in our communities. We have a growing fringe- that is, people who come to the odd service, who are warm to the intentions and presence of the church in the community, and who (therefore) are on the regular email list- we are working a bit 'smarter' administratively- so we have a revamped website (with thanks to Gillian), and I now have 89-ish people on my weekly email list, and 193 people on the monthly one- to whom I send the Loop, Forest Church details and seasonal information. I'm also in the process of producing publicity about getting married in church, to share with our local wedding venues.

The joy, and the challenge, is that as God leads us onwards, we need to be able to resource the future. 2023 has shown me that the harvest is plentiful- there is potential everywhere- and if you remember that verse in Matthew 9, you'll remember the next bit- 'but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field.' So the biggest thing I ask for is our prayers- prayers that we will be an enduring blessing- flexible and ready to move with the moving Spirit in Severn Loop.

We pray too for some administrative help- the admin load does take time- and some of the quiet work of remembering anniversaries for our occasional offices needs a boost- we're grateful for those who have volunteered to be part of a card-writing ministry. We'd also like to think about a termly *Loop Prayer and Praise* evening service; and maybe more long-term a monthly breakfast and informal service for families- possibly at the Mission Church. We're going to have a service as well as reflection areas at this year's reenactment weekend at Battlefield. We're beginning

to convene worship teams to help with lay-led services at Montford, Shrawardine and Bicton.

And then finally, we continue to think about the gift of our churchyards- we've talked for many years about a trail between the churches, and some seasonal focal points in our churchyards- we'd love to get started on that. In fact, someone just recently came to see me about an Arts and Crafts Festival across the Loop- maybe in the Easter season next year, incorporating churchyard trails amongst other things.

But as always, our first response to all that we see is to give thanks- for God who loves us first and invites us to join in, in the pattern of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. We give thanks for one another, for the continuing adventure, for the encouraging signs we notice. We acknowledge that it's not all plain sailing as we journey onwards together- it is (surprise surprise) the way of the cross- there is suffering and there is joy, but we know which is the greater. As we travel through 2024 and onwards, we look forward with hope.

Here is a prayer that you might like to pray for us all:

God our Creator and Redeemer, help us in Severn Loop to grow in holiness, unity, effectiveness and people.

Draw us closer to you and to those around us.

Give us enthusiasm in our faith, and wisdom in sharing it with young and old.

Open our eyes to new opportunities, our lips to sing and speak of you, and our hearts to welcome the stranger.

Grow your kingdom in us and in the world,

through the intercession of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.