**Church Annual Report to West Acre Parish Council 24 May 2021**

**My apologies for not being able to attend your Annual meeting this year** but I am conducting the Annual church Meetings for the parishes of Newton by Castle Acre and South Acre this evening.

**My report is as follows;**

As with many other local organisations and national institutions the last year has been a very difficult one both practically and financially, as well as personally. In March 2020 the government closed all churches overnight – preventing even the clergy from going into say the daily offering of prayer for their communities. We lost the ability to celebrate Easter 2020 in church together as well as Harvest and Christmas. Thankfully **we were able to come together for worship this Easter 2021** and although many people are still anxious about returning to communal worship we gathered a congregation of 62 people at the main service and put on two other services - one at Newton and the other **in West Acre where sadly only 3 were to join with us.** As well as the safety restrictions of social distancing and wearing of masks in church, **the government will still not let us allow congregational singing. There have also been tough restrictions on numbers for funerals and weddings resulting in many weddings being postponed and in the case of funerals many people being unable to join with family to grieve the death of a loved one.** We have been able to Livestream a service each Sunday through a zoom webinar and placing them on our Facebook page and web sites and many people from across the world have been able to join in with us.

Financially as a Group we have manged to meet all our commitments including the annual contribution we have to make to the diocese for the cost of a parish priest in our midst. Indeed we are the only Group of Parishes in our Deanery (stretching from Castle Acre to Thompson and Caston) to have done so as well as to meet all our week by week expenses. A major part of this achievement has been our ability to work together as a Group of Parishes supporting each other. Thus **West Acre’s contribution to the cost of a priest has been pegged at £ 3000 whilst Pentney, Narborough and Castle Acre have picked up the lion’s share of the cost.** This subsidy to West Acre cannot go on for ever and each parish does need to be willing to own the responsibility of wanting a church building and a priest in their midst. Equally we have to recognise that with a slimmed down number of clergy we cannot provide everything in every parish and we encourage you to consider each of the seven churches as your church and be prepared to move around the Group in just the same way in the rest of our lives we move around for shopping, banking, medical care etc. To this end we would encourage a much greater support for **our annual Gift Day** **which is your opportunity to show support for the church in your parish – for the last two years we have received contributions from only four households – last year our funds shrunk by nearly £ 4000 and on that basis we have perhaps but 2 or 3 years of being able to operate.** Unlike Playing Fields and Village Hall the churches have received no financial help from government to redress the difficulties of Covid 19.

**We have continued** through the past year **to explore ways in which to seek funding for the restoration of All Saints Church, as well as find funding** for the vision **to eventually offer the village hall the opportunity to come into the main area of the church building.** A meeting with **National Heritage Lottery in February 2020 indicated we need to pursue these two** pathways **separately. In April/ May of this year we met with Historic England to see if West Acre Church might be placed on the Heritage at Risk Register.** We await their formal response but the outcome of that meeting was an indication that the building was certainly vulnerable in terms of its overall structural condition.

The church is also vulnerable in another way – Covid 19 has brought with it the need to grasp the problem of so many church buildings across Norfolk. A Review Commission has been set up in the diocese to look at the viability of the local churches. **We have been informed that** the guiding principles of this Commission are likely to be that **if you cannot elect churchwardens and appoint a treasurer and have at least 5 in your congregation you may well be deemed non-viable and closed. I have to give warning that West Acre church is on the cusp of falling into that category and as a community there needs to be serious consideration as to whether folks are prepared to step forward to create a lively sense of church at the heart of this community – after working with you over 22 years I certainly hope that you will have a future but it is in your hands.**

Finally speaking personally, as many of you will appreciate, the last few months have been very difficult ones for us personally with the death of our son Andrew at the age of 34. He was making tremendous progress in his chosen career of Theatre production - a passion which began here at West Acre Theatre and he was making a name for himself up and down the country.

We are most grateful for the love and care that each of these seven communities have shown to us and made it possible for us to continue to share life with all its joys and heartaches with you all. **At the end of November this year I reach the age of 70** (I know you cannot believe it) **and that means compulsory retirement. We shall be moving to Hillside in Swaffham opposite the Rugby Club but it will represent the end of nearly 23 years of serving you and the end of 42 years of ministry in the Diocese of Norwich – 32 of which have been spent living at Narborough.** **We thank you for that privilege and hope and pray that the fortunes of the church and its life here may flourish again.**

***Canon Stuart Nairn***

***Feast of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ - 13 May 2021***