

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST MARCH



Text, design and photography

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**REACH Ely (Reimagining Churches as
Community Assets for the Common Good)**
is a multi-partner research project that
aims to help communities make fuller use
of their churches.

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The project is implemented by

**Centre for Social Innovation at
Cambridge Judge Business School
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*with the generous support of Allchurches Trust
and Historic England*

www.reachely.org

The challenges facing church communities and their buildings have been extensively studied in the light of declining church attendance in the United Kingdom over several decades. REACH Ely aims to address the less-well-understood opportunities for churches to engage and reconnect with the 97.7 per cent of the local communities in the Diocese of Ely who do not attend their parish churches.

With the absence of universal determinants of success and failure of churches in the community engagement context, the REACH Ely project will provide an understanding of the relationship between communities and wider use of church buildings as well as the contribution that churches make to the common good. The project will determine community values, needs and opportunities that can be used in the most effective way to ensure a win-win outcome for communities and sustainable future of church buildings.

The **case study series** is based on in-depth interviews and observations about church building use with informants from a subset of deaneries and parishes in the Diocese of Ely, supplemented with secondary information about the communities they represent. The purpose of the case study is to unearth various church experiences in renovating and envisioning their buildings as missional and social spaces, engaging with local and wider communities, addressing current challenges, and learning from their practice.

The **Glossary** is a separate document that accompanies the case study series. It is available as a download from the project's website www.reachely.org

On the cover: Handmade toys at St John's parish hall, March.

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ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST MARCH

Church Category: Market town

Deanery: March

Address: Station Road, March,
Cambridgeshire PE15 8NH

Website: www.stjohnmarch.co.uk

Changing Market Town project:
www.elydiocese.org/changing-market-towns



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Grade II listed building; Bell-turret; Basic kitchen and facilities in the church; Memorial window; Stained glass windows; Marble pulpit and font; Well-equipped refurbished parish hall with meeting rooms and modern facilities; No graveyard

Congregation to Population Ratio: 44 / 11,614

Fundraising: Summer Fete; Christmas Fair

Income Generation: Parish hall rentals; St John's Craft Group

Communications: Website; Facebook page; Joint magazine with St John's and St Mary's churches in March; Weekly bulletin; Visitors' Book; Noticeboard

Community Engagement: Parish hall; Revolutions group; AA; Forest School; Summer Fete; Christmas Fair; Children and Families worker; Activity groups for children; Youth club; St John's First Thursday; Craft Group; Chat-Tea Meal; School collaborations; Churches Together in March group.

ROOTS



Profile

March is a large fenland market town and civil parish in the Isle of Ely area of Cambridgeshire. The town sits at the centre of the Fenland District; approximately 71% of Fenland's population live within the four market towns of March, Chatteris, Wisbech, and Whittlesey. March has three wards – east, north and west. The town is 14km (9 miles) south of Wisbech, 22km (14 miles) to the north-west of Ely and 47km (29 miles) north of Cambridge.

Like many fenland towns, March was once an island surrounded by marshes. As the land drained, the town grew and prospered as a trading and religious centre. The town is situated on the banks of the navigable old course of the River Nene, which today is mainly used by pleasure boats. Historically, March was known as an early centre of nonconformity, with 139 dissenters and one papist in 1676. In the 19th century, the town grew rapidly by becoming an important railway centre and a main junction station on the Great Eastern and Great Northern railways, 140 km (88 miles) from London by rail. In 1921, the Isle of Ely had a greater proportion of railway workers than any other county except Cumberland and the Soke. At present, March is served by regular railway services with connections to the north and south of the country. There is also a western bypass to take the A141 and some of the traffic away from the town centre. The B1099 and B1101 roads pass through the town.

March is a participating research site of the Diocese of Ely's five-year project **Changing Market Towns**, an expression of one of the Levers for Change within the diocesan Ely2025 Growth Strategy, that focuses on enabling and sustaining church growth (www.elydiocese.org/changing-market-towns) (See also REACH Ely case studies *Huntingdon, Littleport, and Wisbech*).



Top: View of St John's church from Station Road. Bottom clockwise: South entrance to the church; Yew trees seen from the arched doorway entrance; March train station.



According to the 2011 census, March had a population of 22,298. The ward of North March, the location of the church of St John the Evangelist, has approximately 4,830 occupied households. Out-of-town development has also taken place at the Meadowland retail park opened in 2008 to the north of the town centre. There has long been a market in March, and market days are Wednesday and Saturday. There is one secondary school (no Church of England secondary school in town) and four primary schools, one of which is All Saints Academy – an inter-church school that celebrates the traditions of both the Roman Catholic and Anglican faith. March has a non-league football club, March Town United F.C.

The town centre has many independent shops and retailers, a community centre, a museum on the High Street, and a number of bars and restaurants. There are four major supermarkets and many food processing factories in the area. HM Prison Whitemoor, a maximum security prison for males, opened in 1991 to the northwest of the town. There are a number of packing factories which employ both significant numbers of local and migrant labour. With some of the lowest house prices in the region, the town receives many people who relocate here for retirement or to be near family.

As well as the four Anglican churches of St John, St Peter, St Mary, and St Wendreda, there is a joint Methodist and United Reformed church (Trinity Church), a Centenary Baptist Church (founded 1700), a Grace Baptist Church (Providence Baptist), an Independent Pentecostal Church and a Fenland Community Church, which focuses on people with learning disabilities. There is a Roman Catholic church in March, whose priest lives in March and serves the mass centre in Chatteris.

Above clockwise: March World War I memorial in the town centre; St John's churchyard with footpath; Some of the sawn parts of a fallen old tree in the churchyard used for outdoor activities; River Nene in March.



*Top: View towards East window from the nave. Middle: Kitchen facilities in the church building; Arranged pews for children's activities.
Bottom: The nave of St John's church with the font and information stands placed under the West window.*

Building

St John the Evangelist church is located on the north eastern side of March, a less prosperous area of the town, close to the railway station and the town centre. The building was built in 1872 to cater for the expansion of the town that followed the arrival of the railway. The church was a gift to the parishioners from the trustees of the rectory of Doddington division acts, and was consecrated on 29th July 1872 by the Bishop of Ely. It is the northernmost of the four churches in the March Team Ministry, sitting on a quiet one of the busiest roads in March leading to the station suburban road next to a large cemetery on Station Road. There is a mortuary chapel, with tower and spire. The cemetery is now under the control of the Urban District Council.

The church, built by Thomas Henry Wyatt (who also designed St Mary's and St Peter's in March), is an edifice of stone in the Early English and Decorated styles, consisting of chancel, nave, aisles, south porch, a western bellcote with one bell, and a tiny spire. It is built in plain style from stone with 13th century-style fenestration. A plain exterior of the building belies the fine architecture within. The nave, with a scissor-braced roof, is a simple hall, with a little diamond-shaped bell-turret over the west bay. There is no clerestory, but the aisles are composed of rows of little individual gables, containing double-headed windows crowned with cinquefoils.

St John's church stands much as it was originally built, the only major addition being a large vestry on the north side.

Inside, some pews have been removed to make circulation easier, to provide for kitchen space in the south aisle, and a meeting space with a reversed pew in the north aisle and south aisle. The building also has very basic kitchen and WC facilities. A large platform has been built at the entrance to the chancel for less formal worship and wider variety of events outside worship. The roof is reaching the end of its life and a major reroofing project will be required in the near future. This was reported to be at a cost of £187,000 in 2015. The church sits in large grounds with a number of fine yew trees. There has never been a graveyard. The building has seating for 200 people.

Parish hall. The hall, built in 1933, is situated on the corner of Queens Street and Station Road. This is the third hall to be owned by the parish: the first being in Grays Lane and the second one in Broad Street (present NatWest bank). As well as a main hall and small meeting room, the parish hall has a well-equipped kitchen, recently refurbished, and WC facilities. Recently, new windows have been installed. Parish hall refurbishment is in progress, and largely completed now.

Artefacts

A memorial window in the chancel is dedicated to Sir Algernon William Peyton bart, of Swift's House, Bicester, Oxon, the late patron, who died in 1872. Stained glass windows, by Clayton and Bell, depict scenes of Crucifixion, Mary and John, Saints at rest, and David and Cecilia. The pulpit and the font, which is located near the west window, are built in marble.



St John's parish hall's exterior, rooms, and kitchen facilities.

RUNNING

Team

St John's is a member of the **March Team Ministry** that also comprises St Wendreda's, St Peter's, and St Mary's (see *REACH Ely case studies in March*). Two paid staff are the Team Rector with pastoral responsibility for the ministry at St Peter's, St John's, and St Mary's; and Team Vicar who has responsibility for developing and leading Mission initiatives within the whole of March, and pastoral responsibility for St Wendreda's.

The March Team Ministry share:

- Team operations manager whose office base is at St John's. This post is funded by the Market Towns initiative;
- Children and families worker who is training to become a Licensed Lay Minister (LLM) – most of whose time is spent at St John's;
- Another vacant CMT post which the Team hope to be to reach out to adults in the town who currently have little contact with the church.

The church also has a licensed lay minister and two churchwardens and a pastoral care Authorised Lay Minister. Under CMT there is funding for a second community engagement/fresh expressions missionary, but so this position remains vacant.

St John the Evangelist church offers a traditional form of worship with a contemporary message and has a substantial focus on children's outreach and ministry. The Team Council includes representatives from all four churches and explores ways in which the churches can work more closely together.

Religious Services

Sunday services at St John's include Holy Communion on the first, third and fifth Sundays of the month at 8 a.m. (shared alternate weeks with St Wendreda's) and a main Sunday Communion service (except the first Sunday of the month) at 9.30 a.m. Also, on the first Sunday, there is a family service in the church hall and a service of wholeness and reconciliation at 9.30 a.m. in the church.

A midweek Holy Communion on Tuesdays is held at 10 a.m. Joint services are offered on special occasions, such as Holy Week, Ascension Day, Ash Wednesday and Corpus Christi. A robed choir leads the music at most of the main services. All main services conclude with tea and coffee.

The ministry team have links with two local primary schools. Monthly Assemblies and termly eucharists are held at All Saints Academy. Children's events held recently at St John's include Messy Breakfast and Messy Church. St John's church is in walking distance for many of its congregation (and parking has to be on street) unlike some of the other churches in the group.

Covid-19 lockdown. Church services and other activities were suspended during the coronavirus pandemic and the national lockdown in 2020. The church was keeping in touch with people, particularly those who had to self-isolate, via **telephone calls** and **weekly mailing** to those with email and had delivered to those without (across the town 220 email and 100 by hand). The March Team **livestreamed** some services via **Zoom** and encouraged people to access professional services online and those broadcast on TV and radio and shared regular updates via its **newsletter**. On its **website**, St John's church shared useful links to a number of resources and virtual church services. In addition, Chat-Tea (*see Community*) was running three days a week providing meals to those in need and delivering them to people's homes over 100 a week.

Parish Share

In 2019, parish share expenditure paid in full was £26,586.

Fundraising

Summer Fete and Christmas Fair. These are annual events organised by the church that feature stalls and a concert by the choir. The concert is a ticket-free event but refreshments are offered on sale. These events raise approximately £1,500 for church funds.


Income Generation

Rental income from the hiring of the parish hall is the main source of income for the church. The hall is heavily used by local organisations and groups.

St John's Craft Group's small stall with postcards, handmade soft toys, honey and jam is set at the back of the north aisle.

Communications

St John the Evangelist church has a **website** and a **Facebook** page, which hosts a Mindful March Ministry, offering prayer, encouragement and scripture. St John's issues a **weekly bulletin** about services and events. A **magazine** is published jointly with the other two March churches of St Peter and St Mary. Its subscribers are mainly church members, although some people who are not church members receive it too. A **Visitors' Book** records visitors' notes and compliments about the church, its artefacts, and received welcome. A church **noticeboard** is positioned close to the road.



“People, if they moved into the town and they started going round the churches, they would go round until they found St Peter’s where they would stick. That’s now changed, and now they stick at St John’s too because of the changes, the friendship, music and children’s work.”

Revd Andrew Smith
Team Rector

REACH

Community

St John's Parish Hall serves as a functioning community social space. The well-equipped hall with a meeting room, on the corner of Station Road and Queen Street, are available for community hire, for private parties, clubs and groups.

Revolutions is a church-run community group for those aged 11-25 with Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND). It meets on a Thursday evening at the parish hall and aims to provide a fun and safe environment to help boost young people's social skills and confidence. Sessions are held weekly (all year) and aim to provide a ratio of 2:4 volunteers to young people whenever possible. A tuck shop is available, selling a variety of sweets, crisps, drinks, fruits and healthy snacks.

Chat-Tea. This is a not-for-profit non-faith-based community project that provides free hot meals for anyone who is in genuine need. On the first Sunday of the month, young people from the Youth Group usually provide an afternoon tea for the older members of the community. This is hosted in St John's church hall. Donations are accepted towards ongoing funding but are not expected.

Alcoholics Anonymous. This group is hosted by the parish hall and takes place on a Tuesday evening in the small hall.

Forest School is a holistic approach to outdoor learning that enables children to develop their confidence, risk taking, team-working and social skills through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment. St John's Forest School is hosted in the church grounds. Some of the sawn parts of a fallen old tree in the churchyard have been used for outdoor activities and as canvases for children's drawings.

In addition, the church runs regular **Dance and Martial Arts groups.**

Events

Summer Church Fete is an annual community event with a barbeque and various outdoor entertainment suitable for all ages. In addition, there is **Christmas Fair** with communal singing led by the choir.

Activity groups for children. St John's Junior Church (**John's Juniors**) and a creche are run at the same time as the main Sunday service at 9.15 a.m. **Mother and toddler group** runs in the parish hall on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings. **The Brownies and Rainbows**, a children's group, uses the parish hall on a weekly basis. **Messy Church** and **Children's Festival** are rung regularly – on May Bank Holiday the church welcomed over 100 children at a fun day.

Youth Club convenes on the third Sunday of the month, from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.

St John's First Thursday. On the evening of the first Thursday of each month, a social group for ladies is held in members' houses. Men are equally welcome to attend.

“St John's has the biggest proportion of people walking to the church... The congregation is a good mix of those who have moved into the area over the years, and long standing March people. We have made the building more flexible by creating prayer and children's areas. The grounds have also become more of a play park.”

Revd Andrew Smith
Team Rector



Children's and community outdoor events in the churchyard of St John's church (Photos by St John March).

Engagement

St John the Evangelist church has a strong focus on **families and younger people** and on working with the disadvantaged in the local community. **The Children and Families worker** spends the majority of their time at St John's.

Study groups. These are organised on a monthly basis and are offered at St John's. Weekly sessions are held in Lent.

St John's Craft Group. This regular craft club makes things and promotes the church at Craft Fairs in the area.

Churches Together in March. St John's is a member of Churches Together in March (CTIM) (www.churchestogether.org/march), a group representing a wide range of Christian backgrounds. The group carries out a range of activities together, as well as the individual activities of each church. Leaders and clergy from the various churches meet together most months for a short time of prayer and simply getting together. CTIM also supports other local Christian activities most importantly the Foodbank, Christians Against Poverty, Christian Aid, and Christmas shoeboxes.



Top: Handmade toys, cards, honey and jam by St John's Craft Group on sale in the church. Middle: Church entrance and WC facilities; The font and information materials in the church. Bottom: Children's corner and rearranged pews.

REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Church building condition

Serious problems had been identified with the condition of the church roof and early attempts to obtain grants had failed. This led to speculation that the church might have to close, leaving the community and the congregation demoralised. No alternative uses could be envisaged for the building and the local feeling was that the church would close. St John's community has now been encouraged and motivated to raise funds for the work needed and a thriving church community will be key to this happening. In addition, work will be needed to upgrade St John's parish hall at some point in the future and facilities could also be improved within the church itself.

Flexibility of church building

The church has a wide amount of flexible use: children's events and play days, concerts, school events, craft events as well as weddings and other services. The fixed furniture is an asset to these. The church team recognise that it would be good to upgrade, however, they admit that it would be difficult.

Income generation

The community at St John the Evangelist church has to work hard to attract people to its fundraising events and, given that there are many families in hardship in the area, this is not always easy to do. Although local people appear to care about the church when it was falling on hard times, not many are prepared to give either enough money.

Youth engagement

March Team Ministry works hard to engage the local youth and accepts that this is an ongoing challenge.

Lessons Learned

To maintain and strengthen the connection with the worshipping community

Although there are people with strong loyalties to St John's, the congregation had been divided when the current incumbent arrived, and morale was low. The church had lost its own vicar some ten years ago and had then been united with St Wendreda's, but that relationship had not been successful. Also, the rumours about the potential closure of the church had been demoralising for the community. The current incumbent has worked to bolster the enthusiasm of the congregation, which is now gently growing stable and actively looking to raise funds to have a vibrant church life, which may in due course be that platform to raise funds for the roof.

To work in partnership

With two ministers overseeing the four churches in the group, there is less competition between the churches than had previously been the case. Each church has been able to restructure its mission and develop its own type of ministry, serving different demographics. In the case of St John's, the mission is focused on young people and the more vulnerable members of the community. Ways of working together are explored through the Team Council. St John's church is also a member of Churches Together in March.

To reach out to the younger members of the church

The Children and Families worker now spends most of their time at St John's, as there are greater levels of need and deprivation within the community. The toddler group is very well attended and

there are regular groups held for all ages at the parish hall. The second as yet unfilled CMT post will help us to reach out especially to adults.

To create a living church

The midweek service at St John the Evangelist church is well attended. Changes have been made to the building and the grounds to make them more usable by both church and external groups. Moving some of the pews has made a difference by creating a space for children attending services.

To use the church buildings for activities that benefit the local community and the church

The March Team Ministry orients the four churches in March towards community needs. There are regular mother and toddler, women's and men's groups at all four churches, and a youth club at St Wendreda's and St John's. All the church halls host a very large number of community organisations such as Women's Institutes, museum societies, Alzheimer's Society, and Breathe Easies. In addition, recreational initiatives like boxing clubs, dance clubs, jazz and brass bands vary across the four churches.

To serve the community

The pandemic lockdown in 2020 made it impossible to host Chat-Tea in St John's parish hall on the first Sunday of each month. The March Team Ministry decided that the pandemic disruption should not prevent this successful initiative and organised hot meals collection and delivery three times a week – on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. People could place an order by phone and contact details were shared in newsletters, church websites, and St John's Facebook page.



“The church is here for everybody, and therefore meeting a need of the community is important.”

Revd Andrew Smith
Team Rector

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