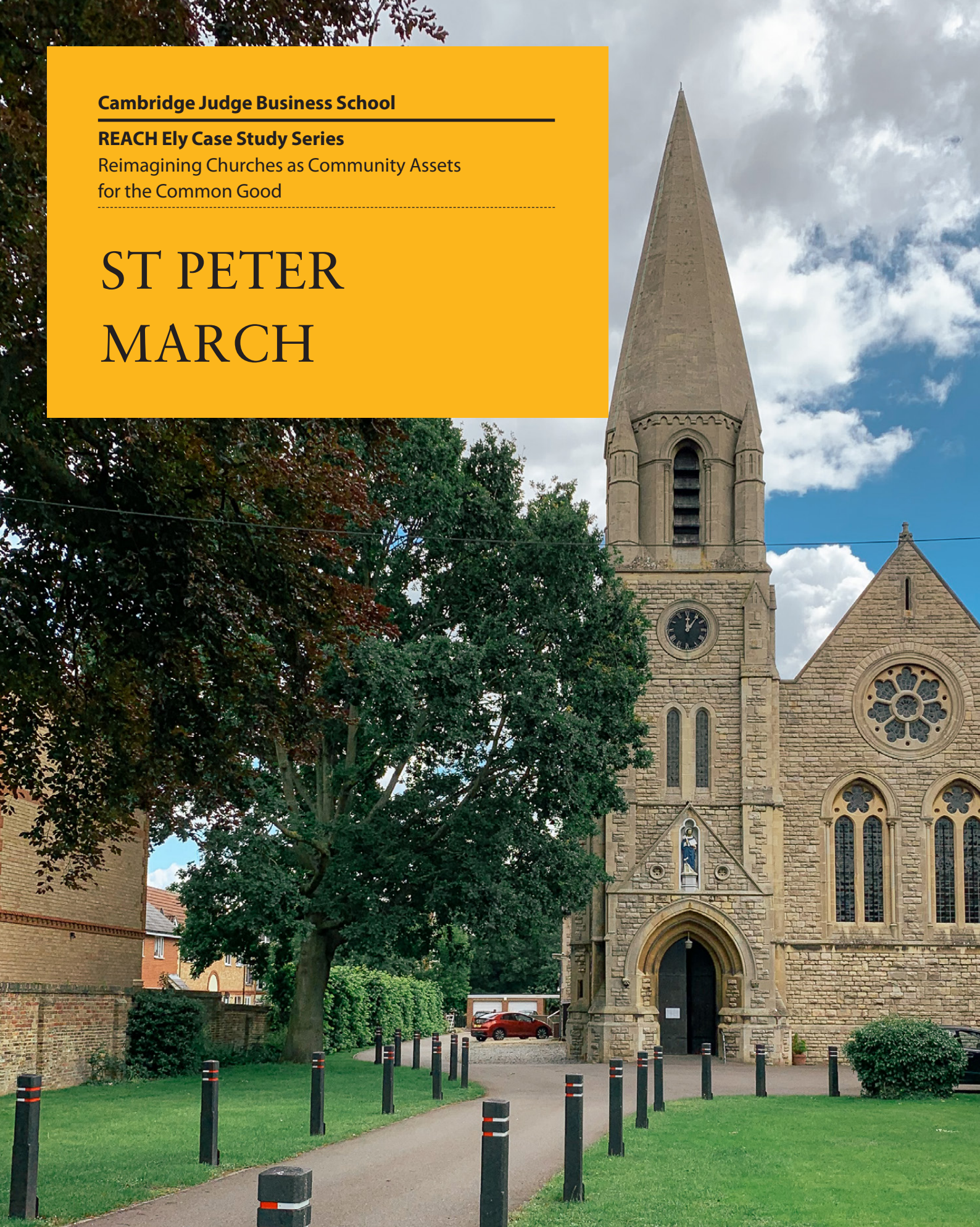


Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

ST PETER 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
and the Diocese of Ely**

*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: View of St Peter's church from the High Street in March.

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ST PETER MARCH

Church Category: Market town

Deanery: March

Address: High Street, March,
Cambridgeshire PE15 9JR

Website: www.stpeterschurchmarch.co.uk

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



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Grade II listed building; Church hall; North-west tower with one bell; Some pews removed; Early English style interior with wide arcades; Victorian stained glass; West façade with clock and statue of Saint Peter; No graveyard; Modern kitchen and WC facilities both in the church and the church hall

Congregation to Population Ratio: 90 / 6,168

Fundraising: Bacon Buttie Festival; Christmas Tree Festival; Flower and Craft Festival; St George's Day; Bar B Q's; Social events and concerts

Income Generation: Rental income of hall and church

Communications: Website; Facebook page; Weekly news sheet *Spotlight*; Joint magazine with St John's and St Mary's churches in March; Church noticeboard; Visitors' Book; Information stands

Community Engagement: Church buildings as venues for community and town events; Fresh Expressions; Rehearsal space; Flower Festival; Concerts; Christmas Tree Festival; Men's group; Ladies' group; Knit and Natter; Sunday Club; Mother and toddler group; Tiny Tots group; Children and Families worker; Foodbank; Mothers' Union; Pop-up church; Churches Together in March.

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) 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. March 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 Peter's from north-east. Bottom clockwise: Church hall; Entrance doors to the church with the statue of Saint Peter; Church noticeboards.



Church hall interiors.

According to the 2011 census, March had a population of 22,298. Out-of-town development has 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.

In addition to four Church of England churches of St Peter, St John, 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.

Building

The large parish church of St Peter, erected in 1881, is a fine example of a Victorian Church. The large rock-faced church was built to hold 700 people and is located centrally on the town's High Street. It is said that St Peter's was located there to reclaim territory off other traditions, given the large number of chapels in the town. The building is constructed of an Ancaster stone structure with Bath stone mouldings. The church consists of a chancel, nave, two aisles, a Priest's vestry, a children's room, which now serves as a choir vestry, north-west tower with one bell, and large broach spire that rises between four turrets. The base of the tower serves as a porch. The church has never had a graveyard.

The building remains largely unchanged and is in good condition with no outstanding issues. It has been re-roofed, some of the pews have been removed and there has been a small amount of reordering. The interior has wide arcades in the Early English style. The north aisle of St Peter's also serves as a Lady Chapel suitable for smaller services and private prayer.

St Peter's church is open every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (or sunset if earlier). It is the busiest of the four Church of England churches in March in terms of

the number of events it organises and hosts. At present, the church building can accommodate about 400 people.

Church hall. The adjoining church hall has been updated and redecorated and is well used by organisations in the town, with bookings all day and every day. St Peter's church hall has a central hall that can seat 60 people, a small meeting room, and a kitchen and WC facilities, all of which are wheelchair accessible. A small board 'Hire Our Hall' is set at the entrance to the hall.

Artefacts

The church clock is believed to date from the late 17th century and is said to be the oldest working mechanical object in March, made without bolt or screw. It was erected in the old market buildings in 1832 and when the buildings were demolished in 1898, the clock was given to St Peter's church. The bell was made in 1832 in Downham Market and weighed five hundred-weight. Tours of the bell tower take place over the Heritage Open Days Weekend.

The west front faces High Street and is decorated with two double windows and a rose window above. There is a clock in the middle of the west facade, and a statue of St Peter above the doorway. St Peter's church has a wealth of pictorial stained glass windows, dating from the Victorian era.



Top clockwise: View towards the chancel from the nave; High Altar and East window; Pews in the nave.
 Bottom: View from the chancel towards West window.

RUNNING

Team

St Peter's is a member of the **March Team Ministry** that also comprises St Wendreda's, St John'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.

There are two churchwardens at St Peter's. 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 include Holy Communion (Book of Common Prayer) at 8 a.m., Parish Communion Service with a Sunday Club for young people and creche at 11 a.m. Weekly Family Communion Service congregation includes people of all ages. On the first and third Sundays, Evensong or special services are held at 4 p.m. in winter months and at 6.30 p.m. in the summer.

Regular midweek services include Wednesday 10 a.m. Holy Communion followed by refreshments at St Peter's, an Anglican Churches in March morning prayer on Thursday at 8.30 a.m., Compline at 9.15 p.m. on Wednesdays in Lent, and Advent and Daily Prayers at 12.30 p.m. from Monday to Friday.

The average number attending weekly 90 adults whose age ranges from young families to people in their 90s.

There are a good number of special services for organisation especially around Christmas, but also seasonal services with a particular focus. In addition, a monthly study group meets weekly in Lent, and weekly Stations of the Cross in Lent are followed by a simple lunch.

Covid-19 lockdown. During the pandemic crisis in 2020, St Peter's church was locked and weddings and christenings postponed, in line with the Church of England's requirements for all church buildings. 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 St Peter's **news sheet**. Church **website** also shared useful links to a number of resources and virtual church services.

Parish Share

In 2019, parish share expenditure was £33,564.

Fundraising

The most recent significant fundraising campaign was carried out to fund the re-roofing of the church some twenty years ago. St Peter March is well positioned in the town centre for significant fundraising events, such as fetes and a Bacon Buttie Festival.

Bacon Buttie Festival. This charity event, started in 2011, is organised by the church for local residents to socialise and try a variety of sandwich combinations including the Churchwarden Chilli Challenge. There was also a book and cake stall, bric-a-brac and refreshments. The 2018 festival received more than 300 people and generated £1,000 towards church funds.

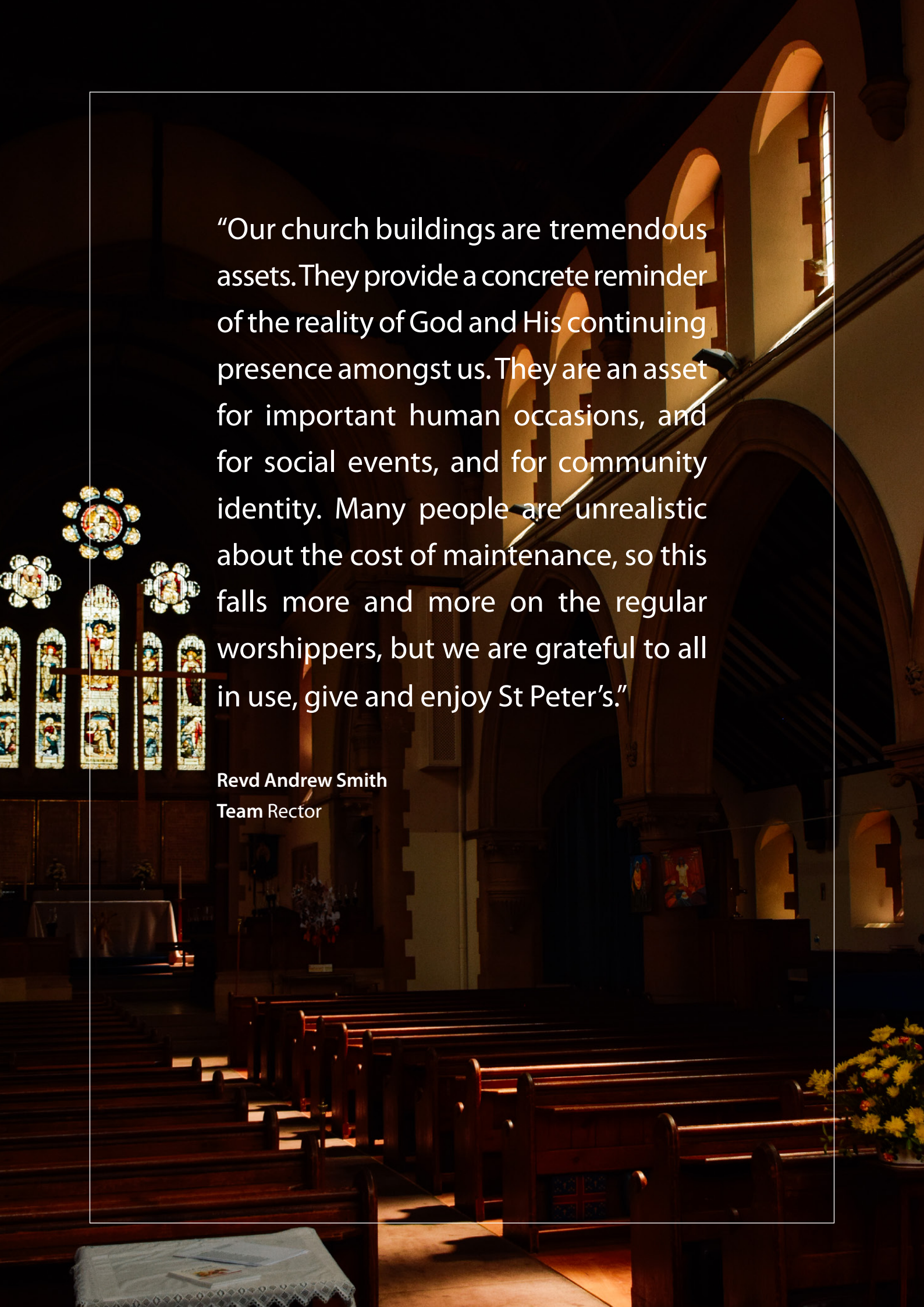
Christmas Tree Festival. This annual event generates about £1,800 (*see Events*).

Income Generation

Rental income. The church hall is hired out to many external organisations and to classes funded by the NHS, such as an Alzheimer's group, exercise and physiotherapy, and a group for children with learning difficulties. The church hall contributes approximately £5,000 to the church per annum.

Communications

St Peter March has a **website**, **Facebook** page, and publishes a weekly **news sheet** Spotlight with details of services at St Peter's and St Mary's. A **magazine** is published jointly with the other two March churches of St John and St Mary. The church's **noticeboard** is set at the entrance in High Street, and a **Visitors' Book** and **information stands** are available in the church.

The background image shows the interior of a church. On the left, there is a large, colorful stained glass window with several panels depicting religious scenes. The church has a high ceiling with a series of pointed arches. In the foreground, rows of dark wooden pews are visible, some with white lace tablecloths. The lighting is warm and soft, highlighting the architectural details and the texture of the wood.

“Our church buildings are tremendous assets. They provide a concrete reminder of the reality of God and His continuing presence amongst us. They are an asset for important human occasions, and for social events, and for community identity. Many people are unrealistic about the cost of maintenance, so this falls more and more on the regular worshippers, but we are grateful to all in use, give and enjoy St Peter’s.”

Revd Andrew Smith
Team Rector

REACH

Community

The church and the church hall are venues for many community events, such as coffee mornings, Christian Aid lunches and free coffee concerts on Saturday mornings. The town's Remembrance Sunday service as well as the Mayor's carol service are held at St Peter's. The carol service is followed by drinks and mince pies in the church hall, with a retiring collection for the mayor's charity.

Fresh Expressions. Plans for children's work, including after school club and an Easter 'Crime Scene Initiative' for primary school children were cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Rehearsal space. One of the users of the church is the local brass band rehearsing in St Peter's church. The hall is also used by folk and band music groups. To encourage the use of church building space, the PCC does not enforce a letting fee, but relies on voluntary donations.

Events

Flower Festival. This annual event (admission £1, children free) alternates between St Peter's and St Mary's churches. The festival takes three days and features themed flower arrangements, paintings and crafts. Various stalls, raffle and refreshments are provided. The festival concludes with Songs of Praise.

Concerts. Free monthly concerts are held at St Peter's church on a Saturday morning attended by about twenty people. There are other orchestral concerts in the year especially by Fenland Music, Variate, and the Brass band.

Christmas Tree Festival. This annual three-day event features over 60 Christmas trees on display at St Peter's. There are prizes for the trees voted the favourites in the adult and children's sections. The event includes a large prize draw and a Santa's lucky dip as well as stalls of Christmas gifts, cakes, preserves and Christmas cards. On Sunday afternoon. Refreshments are made available throughout Friday and Saturday. The festival concludes on Sunday with a special lunch and the Christingle Service.

Activities for children include St Peter's Junior Church that meets weekly at the same time as the family service. Sunday Club takes place in St Peter's church hall on a Sunday at 11 a.m. and offers fun activities for children from 3 to 16 years old. In addition, Tiny Tots Group also meets on a Thursday morning. There are also activities for children with special physical needs and a drama group.

On page 11 row 1: Mayors and council dignitaries from other parts of the county were among guests at the annual Mayor of March's civic carol service held at St Peter's church; Children's choir at the Mayor of March's civic carol service. Rows 2 & 3: Christmas Tree Festival in the church (Photos by Ian Carter, Cambs Times www.cambstimes.co.uk).



“[The church] is very heavily used by regular users. Sometimes our church and church hall is got used for one off events like children’s parties, but they are heavily booked all the time. There is more demand than supply, but in March there are many community facilities, so pricing is competitive.”

Revd Andrew Smith
Team Rector



Rows 1-2: Annual Bacon Buttie Festival at St Peter's church (Photos by Ian Carter, Cambs Times www.cambstimes.co.uk).

Row 3: Mothers' Union; Shoe Box Appeal collection and coffee morning (Photos by St Peter March);

Row 4: Choir pews and the organ; South aisle with the space for children's activities (Photos by Timur Alexandrov).

Engagement

Focus on families and younger people. St Peter's shares with the rest of the Team a Children and Families worker and is appointing a second worker. It has a good group of volunteers who provide good quality children's work. It has relationships with three of the four primary schools in the town and visits are made to the schools. The children from these schools also visit the church. Events are arranged for children and young people, such as a Crime Scene Investigation event planned for the Easter weekend.

March Foodbank. St Peter's supports the March Foodbank and has a collection point at the church. The Foodbank distributes food to local people in crisis on Tuesdays from Centenary Baptist Church.

Mothers' Union groups. St Peter's has two active Mothers' Union groups, one in the afternoon which tends to have older members than the evening group.

Ladies' Group is a small group that meets on the second Wednesday of the month and has a varied programme of activities. The church also runs a Women's Dining Group.

Men's Group is an informal group that meets once a month and activities include inspiring talks and visits to places of interest. Members also undertake practical tasks around the church.

Knit and Natter social group meets on a Tuesday morning in the church.

Gardening Group maintains the church grounds and are generally useful.

Pop-up church. St Peter's church has taken occasional services at Jubilee Court, a sheltered housing complex near the centre of town.

Pause for Reflection is a series of quiet times offered throughout the year by the March Team Ministry at St Mary's Church in March. There are bi-monthly morning sessions and other evening and Saturday sessions during the year. They are open to anyone who would value a time of reflection. There is no charge for any of the sessions held at St Mary's church (*see REACH Ely case study St Mary March*). Those attending are invited to make a donation in the region of £3 to £5 to help cover costs of heating, printing and other materials.

Churches Together in March. St Peter'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

REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Youth engagement

Work with children had declined, partly because there was less demand from families wanting to obtain places at church schools, but the church is making considerable efforts through its Children and Families worker and the new youth worker to connect with the younger people in the town. The demand for church school places, which declined in 2018, rose to record levels in 2019.

Lack of personnel and volunteers

As people are getting older there are now fewer people willing to volunteer their time, but there is still huge commitment and donations to St Peter's church from the regulars are significant, but it is harder to get money from the wider community who do not realise that the church is locally rather than centrally funded.

Capacity for community use of church buildings

The hall attached to St Peter's church is at capacity in terms of bookings and church activities, and the church itself hosts a large number of services including Remembrance Sunday, the Mayor's Carol service and a large (but declining) number of funerals. Hence, the church and the church hall can be unavailable for additional regular community events.

Lessons Learned

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. Ways of working together are explored through the Team Council. St Peter's church is also a member of Churches Together in March.

To adapt the church building for more flexible and a wider use

The church keeps the pews for services where they are more flexible and effective than chairs as the numbers in a row are variable. During large events, extra chairs from the hall are put in. The open space at the rear of the church and in the aisle allows for flexibility and the orchestra play at Sunday services. In addition, the pews provide the platform for the Flower and Christmas Tree Festivals.

To create a living church

Given its location in the town centre, St Peter's church is viewed as a place that visitors or worshippers can drop into throughout the day. The location helps St Peter's to be a well-used venue for a vast number of community organisations and group in the town. Fundraising events do not have to be widely advertised, given its prime location. The number of activities taking place in the church hall mean that there are always people on site.

To find creative ways to generate funds

The hire charges for the hall have to remain competitive, as there are many venues in the town for organisations to use. The church prefer to use the hall for some of its own events as it is more economical to heat and has better kitchen and WC facilities. Also the church is heavily used for funerals, which are a priority for church building availability.

To serve the community

The March Team Ministry has been running Chat-Tea meals – a not-for-profit non-faith-based community project that provides free hot meals for anyone who is in genuine need. Usually on the first Sunday of the month, young people from the Youth Group provide an afternoon tea in St John's church hall for the older members of the community. As the pandemic lockdown in 2020 made it impossible to host Chat-Tea in St John's church hall, 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 Peter's Facebook page.

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 youth work at St Peter's, 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.



“All who seek God are welcome here. There is no discrimination here on the basis of gender, or race, or sexual orientation, or social class. The net is cast into the sea of humanity.”

Revd Andrew Smith
Team Rector

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