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General Synod ± the waiting is over

The votes are in and counted. The returning officers have declared the results. When Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, on November 23, formally opens the Church of England's General Synod for 2015-2020, it will look very different from its last meeting in July.

Half of the members of the House of Clergy will have changed, as will half of the House of Laity. Half the nine elected suffragan bishops will have changed. The greatest change, however, will be the presence of three women among the House of Bishops: the Bishops of Gloucester, Newcastle and Stockport.

Among some 200 members of the House of Clergy, more than 100 are new this time. A third of the House of Clergy, 66, will be women.

More than 100 of the 200 or so members of the House of Laity have also changed through the election process. Men and women are equally represented in this House of Laity.

Of course, not all those who are new since July are new to General Synod. The new Diocese of Leeds (West Yorkshire and the Dales) has elected its 19 members for the first time. Six of those elected are new since July but the rest were there, representing their former dioceses of Bradford, Ripon and Wakefield.

Others in the new Synod will have been there before, too. Some may be back after a break. Others have been ex-officio members in the past, like Jayne Ozanne and Sir Tony Baldry among the Oxford Diocese laity. Jayne was one of the first appointed members of the Archbishops' Council (1999-2004). Sir Tony, formerly MP for North Oxfordshire, was Second Church Estates Commissioner (2010-2015), acting as a link between Parliament and the Church of England. Both have now been elected.

So, now the waiting is over for the newly-elected members of the General Synod and the real work begins. There will be plenty of

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Services

Sundays

11.00am Sung Eucharist

"Sunday Supplement" the children's activity takes place every Sunday in the sacristy during the service

Weekday Services

Said Eucharist

Tuesday 7.30pm

Wednesday 9.30am

Friday 7.30am

Saints' & Holy Days

Sunday 20th December Advent 4

6.30pm Nine Lessons and Carols by Candlelight
with mulled wine and mince pies to follow.

Thursday December 24th Christmas Eve

11.30pm Midnight Mass and Blessing of the crib

Friday December 25th Christmas Day

11.00am Family Mass

Saturday 26th December St Stephen

11.00am Sung Mass (no sermon) with drinks in the Vicarage to follow

Clergy Day off: Fr. Guy is off duty on Monday but don't hesitate to call him in emergencies.

The Vicar is usually available in the Vicarage, 85 Dartmouth Park Road, from 8:00pm until 9:00pm on Tuesdays for the purpose of interviews, arranging Baptisms, reading of Banns and Weddings etc. he is also available to hear confessions then or by appointment.

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reading to do before their first sessions begin and plenty to learn.

How does the electronic voting system work? How do I get to be called to speak in Synod? What are the Standing Orders that people use to draw debates to a close or call for a vote by houses? What is this Synod going to say on those big issues facing the Church?

All that will become clear to new members as they wait for that moment when the chair of a debate announces their name followed by the hallowed phrase "for, I believe, a maiden speech".

The 'wonder' of the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem

Shepherds in first century Palestine would have been attuned to the wonders and ravages of nature: star-lit nights, cold and heat, storm and calm, and the unwelcome attention of predators, both animal and human. They would have been more aware than we of human dependency on the seasons, and more respectful than us of the precarious nature of existence. Fear, as well as appreciation, would have shaped their religious sensitivities.

Some think the shepherds near Bethlehem may have been guarding sheep for the Jerusalem Temple, which used them as part of the sacrificial ritual of Judaism in those days. Yet the kind of work shepherds did and the hours they had to keep barred them from orthodox religious observance; they were regarded as uncouth and untrustworthy and were not allowed to give testimony in law courts.

It was typical of St Luke (the only New Testament writer to refer to the shepherds) to put them in the forefront of his narrative. Luke is the writer who favours the underdog: tax collectors, sinners, women, old and poor people and non-Jews all figure favourably in

his account. Deliberately he sets before us shepherds as the first Christmas worshippers. They already knew how to wonder.

William of St Thierry wrote: "A man who has lost his sense of wonder is a man dead". The 19th Century scientist Michael Faraday wrote: "Let us consider... how wonderfully we stand upon this world. Here it is that we are born, bred and live, and yet we view these things with an almost entire absence of wonder..." This is no plea for anti-intellectual faith, but rather for the discovery of an extra dimension. Wonder is the prime ingredient of worship and we need to recover it and use it. It takes practice.

William Blake encouraged us to look into the ordinary and see the extraordinary:

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower:
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour..."

The late Michael Mayne, Dean of Westminster wrote, "A sense of the sublime leads to a sense of awe, which is I suppose that combination of wonder and fearfulness you may feel in the presence of what

takes your breath away. It is not afraid in the sense of feeling scared, but rather an awe-struck sense of amazement that the ordinary is rather more extraordinary... it is not the rabbit out of the hat but the rabbit out of the rabbit that is so surprising..."

So, in the astonishing story of heaven-come-to-earth in Bethlehem, of divinity in a cowshed, it is shepherds who receive the revelation. Not priests, not presidents, not philosophers. "An angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." For all they knew it might have been bad news. "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord'"

The response of the shepherds was to go and see. Not to question or even to reason. The main constituent of their belief was already wonder. They were accustomed to marvelling, for they were surrounded by a world of marvels. So they went to look. And as they looked, they marvelled. Later, they were to return "glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard."

Elderly and depressed this winter? Go to church.

Older people with depression can see a bigger improvement in their mental health if they start going to church than if they engage in charity work or sport.

Research from the London School of Economics found that joining a religious organisation is the best

way of combatting depression. But they declined to say whether it is having a faith that gave the benefit, or because church-going gives a sense of belonging. They also found evidence that membership of some political and community organisations may have a detrimental impact on an older person's mental health.

At 3pm

Many people will stop everything at 3pm on Christmas Day to listen to Her Majesty's annual address to the nation. But what does the Queen call her Christmas Broadcast? The One Show!

The story behind the hymn: Good King Wenceslas

Each year at Christmas we sing about good King Wenceslas looking out on the Feast of Stephen... ever wonder who on earth he was? Here are three of the five verses...

Good King Wenceslas looked out
on the Feast of Stephen
When the snow lay round about,
deep and crisp and even.
Brightly shone the moon that
night, tho' the frost was cruel
When the poor man came sight,
gathering winter fuel...

Bring me flesh and bring me wine;
bring me pine logs hither;
Thou and I will see him dine when
we bear them thither.
Page and monarch forth they went,
forth they went together,
Through the rude winds' wild
lament, and the bitter weather...

In his master's step he trod where
the snow lay dinted;
Heat was in the very sod which the
saint had printed.
Therefore Christian men, be sure
wealth of rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor,
shall yourself find blessing.

This carol was 900 years in the making... and started with a brutal murder in Bohemia.

For Wenceslas was a real person, the Duke of Bohemia, who lived in the early 10th century. He seems to have been a rare ruler, in that he was just and had compassion for the poor. His goodness made him enemies, and when he was only 22, he was assassinated on the steps of a church in Prague in 935.

But that was not the end of Wenc-

eslas. Deeply mourned by the common people, he was soon considered a martyr and a saint. A cult of Wenceslas grew up in Bohemia, influencing the High Middle Ages idea of the rex Justus – or 'righteous king' - that is, a monarch whose power stems mainly from his great piety.

The story of Wenceslas came to England sometime before 1853, when Queen Victoria's envoy to Stockholm sent some rare books to a friend, John Mason Neale, Warden of Sackville College, East Grinstead. Here Neale found the story of Wenceslas in an ancient poem by Czech poet Václav Alois Svoboda. Neale published his translation as a carol in 1853. He made the 'Duke' into a 'King', as a later Pope had conferred the regal title on Wenceslas.

The carol tells the poignant story of a young king and his page braving harsh winter weather in order to bring food, wine and fuel to a poor peasant on the Feast of St Stephen (26 December). The journey is terrible, and the page only gets through by following in the king's footprints, step by step, through deep snow. There are themes here of following Christ, through suffering, to do good to the poor.

If the story is ancient, so is the melody that Neale chose for his carol - it goes back to Finland in 1582.

Good King Wenceslas... today, a millennium after his brutal murder, he is still remembered in Prague, where a statue of him stands tall in the middle of Wenceslas Square. His goodness is not forgotten.

The top 10 Bible stories: Who is the Baby?

A little girl was examining a Christmas crib with her grandmother and commented, 'Grandma, it's really nice, but there's one thing that bothers me: is the baby Jesus ever going to grow up? He's the same size he was last year!!' As we continue with the top ten Must Know Stories, the birth of Jesus must be the most well-known. However, are we really growing in our understanding of this story?

The angels announced, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.' (Luke 2: 10,11). The birth of a baby is a time of great joy and excitement and Jesus' birth is good news for all people! He is none other than the king of the universe, who has come as our Saviour. To experience this joy, we must let go self-centredness and living as our own saviour. His deliverance and wholeness is a real cause for joy!

'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.' (Luke 2:14). We may feel anything but peace with God, ourselves, or even with those closest to us at Christmas. How can a Jewish infant born to a peasant family in first century Palestine be the source of peace between God and man in the twenty first century? Jesus came to establish such peace through his death on the cross. Trusting the Prince of Peace in our lives brings peace with God. If we ignore this message of Christmas, we won't benefit from it. As the carol says, 'Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her king.'

“Dear Friends...”

From the Vicars Desk

Once again we come to the start of a new Christian year and begin by preparing for Christmas in Advent. Many of you will have an Advent Calendar especially if you have children. In recent years they have become very popular especially the ones with sweets behind every door. They even make them for dogs! Hopefully all of you have got our Advent booklet, entitled “The Heart of the Matter” which is in effect an adult version.

Inevitably our lives are extra busy at this time of year, but if we are to grow through this season then we need to spend a little time in prayer and study. For each day there is a very short bible study with a reflection and a prayer. You might only have five minutes, or you may have fifteen, but do let's all try to make that commitment for the four weeks of Advent. If you find regular prayer difficult, this may well be a way into making that commitment as you use the booklet day by day.

If by chance you have missed out on collecting one please do ask, it's never too late to start the readings.

The beginning of a new church year is also a good time to review our commitment to Mission in the community. All of you will I am sure be aware of the Diocese of London's Mission initiative Capital Vision 2020. It began last year as a six year program to help us all focus on mission for the twenty first century. We are constantly told by the media of the demise of the

church. We are regaled with statistics of declining numbers yet we in London have bucked the trend and overall our numbers are growing. St Mary's has not grown in recent years, but it has not declined. In fact our numbers are almost identical to twenty years ago. For us that means we have grown as inevitably in our neighbourhood there is considerable movement, with younger folk moving away in order to purchase first or larger homes. So mission is something we need constantly be reminded of. How do we connect with and evangelize our community. Could be doing it better, and if so how. All thoughts would be gratefully received by the PCC to help us in our thinking. In fact we have at least one element of our annual Mission Action Plan on every PCC agenda, so if there is something you would like to suggest please do mention it to a PCC member and it will be discussed and evaluated.

The terrible plight of the Christian communities in Syria should be a cause of major concern for all of us. These are very ancient Christian groups dating back to biblical times. Remember it was on the way to Damascus that St Paul was converted and the Christian community there were those who first welcomed him. So it is clear that they were founded within a very few years of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Sadly all the various factions have been responsible for atrocities against the Christian minority

which has seen huge diminution in its numbers as a result, with many fleeing to Lebanon and Turkey. Because of this Bishop Richard has asked us all to pray for these communities and seek to assist them through his Lent appeal.

The events in Paris just last week bring home to us the conditions that so many live under on a daily basis. We look at one incident and are appalled by the carnage, yet this is a regular occurrence in so many of the cities and towns of Syria. We all need to respond in any way we can and for most of us that will be through donations to reputable charities that can help in the camps of Turkey and Lebanon. Although it seems a long way off perhaps we can begin to think of ways we could raise money during Lent next year.

If you are going to be away over Christmas may I wish you a very happy and blessed time, and if you are here I look forward to seeing you at some or all of our services and hope you will be able to join me for drinks on Boxing morning after the service where we will sing Good King Wenceslas on the feast of St Stephen. (See the article on the opposite page)

Your Parish Priest

Carols misheard by children:

Deck the Halls with Buddy Holly

We three kings of porridge and tar

On the first day of Christmas my tulip gave to me

The star of Bethlehem?

What exactly was it? No scientific theory has ever gained common acceptance. Some speculate that it might have been a conjunction of Jupiter and Halley's Comet. But if the Star of Bethlehem was anything as mundane as that, while it might have excited the interest of the Gentile wise men ('the Magi') from the East, it would hardly have caused them to make a 300-mile journey to investigate further.

These Magi were not idiots. Although they would not have benefited from the privileges of Judaism or its Scriptures, it is very likely that they knew a prophecy uttered centuries earlier – by another Gentile, Balaam, from their own area near the Euphrates (Numbers 22: 4,5):

I see him, but not now; I behold

him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel. (Numbers 24:17)

Further lines predicted the widespread rule of this coming Individual. So it was no wonder that when this new and miraculously unique star appeared, remembrance of the prophecy surfaced.

The Magi followed the star not because of anything to do with horoscopes or divination. They were simply responding to God-given revelation from above. And - they persisted in their search. For although Herod's religious advisors checked the prophecy of Micah 5: 2 - that Israel's future Ruler would be from Bethlehem - none of them thought to make the seven mile journey. What identifies the Magi as The Wise Men was their

supreme desire to find and worship the Child of the Manger.

So – God sent a star to mark the birth of Jesus – in a way that had never happened before and would never happen again. It was a unique star to herald the beginning of a unique life – that changed the course of world history.

Throughout the life of Jesus, we find other God-given and miraculous phenomena. These all came at various significant stages of Jesus' saving work. As well as the angelic singing and star of Bethlehem at his birth, there was the dove at his Baptism, the transcendent light at the Transfiguration, the midday darkness and earthquake at Crucifixion, the visible angels at the Resurrection, the receiving cloud at the Ascension, and the flames and wind at the giving of the Holy Spirit.

In Flanders Fields ± 100 years old this month

Some poems make more of an impact than others, and few can have made more of an impact than In Flanders Fields, first published in Punch magazine 100 years ago, on 8th December 1915.

The poem was written by Canadian physician Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae in the early days of the First World War, shortly after he saw his friend Lieutenant Alexis Helmer killed instantly, his body shattered by a direct hit from a German shell near Ypres.

McCrae officiated at Helmer's burial service, but there are various stories about precisely how and when the poem came to be written. The poppies undoubtedly refer to

the vivid red flowers that sprung up in the poor ground used for burying soldiers. This image and the carefully structured, rhythmic verses live in the memory.

The poem, rejected initially by The Spectator, was sometimes used to encourage people to join up and fight, but now it is often used in Remembrance services, especially in Canada. The use of the poppy as a remembrance symbol was promoted by an American woman, Moina Michael, who described reading the poem as a deeply spiritual experience.

Her repeated efforts eventually bore fruit in America, and the idea spread later through a French woman, Anna Guérin, who per-

suaded the British Legion to adopt it in 1921.

McCrae himself seemed to have been ambivalent about the poem. Although he published one book of poetry, he died before the end of the war – not in battle, but of cerebral meningitis.

Higgs Boson and the Pope

A Higgs Boson particle barged into the Vatican at Midnight on Christmas Eve. The Pope was in the middle of his sermon, and annoyed. He looked up from his notes and said: 'You can't burst in here like that.' Higgs Boson retorted: "Oh yes I can, you know you can't have mass without me!"

Christmas in a Nutshell

We're at that time of year again! But is Christmas just about the shopping, tree or presents? In a nutshell, it's all about a God who has showed up on earth. The creator of the universe, who hands flung stars into space, cared enough to come to earth as a tiny baby. 'The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.' (John 1:14, The Message).

Every year we sing carols and retell the same story of the donkey, inn-keeper, stable, angels, shepherds, star, wise men, gifts and Mary and Joseph with baby! It's interesting, because when we celebrate other

birthdays, we don't recall the details of the pregnancy or birth.

So why do we do all this? In a nutshell, it's about God, who has seen the mess of this world and stepped down to meet our deepest need of relationship with Himself:

'When the time came, He set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, He stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, He lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death.' (Philippians 2, The Message)

Reflecting on Jesus in the manger is a great place to start, but there's so much more than a cute baby lying in the bed of straw:

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator;

If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist;

If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist;

If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer;

But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Saviour.

Podcasts for Advent people

This year a specially themed Advent calendar mixes Christmas with conservation. Produced by Christian environment charity A Rocha UK, the online calendar offers daily podcasts by leaders in conservation, development and theology.

On the theme Hope for the World, they share 'thought for the day'-style seasonal reflections – and rally people to pray for the planet. Audio clips can be heard from such commentators as Christian Aid chief Loretta Minghella OBE and TV presenter Peter Owen-Jones. They apply 'hope' to United Nations climate change talks, which take place in Paris just before the festivities.

Here is a sample transcript, from Holy Trinity Brompton Vicar and Alpha pioneer Nicky Gumbel...

Firstly – and certainly in my case – we need to repent. When I looked

at this subject, I realised there are things we've been doing that we shouldn't have been doing in terms of the environment. And we're trying to put that right. For example, we've transferred to a green energy supplier. I think we are now supplied in the vicarage with wind power. I don't know how that will work out, but we've done it.

Secondly, we should enjoy God's creation with gratitude and not guilt. God loves it when we enjoy his creation. So food is to be enjoyed. Often we read of Jesus, 'while they were eating together..'

Thirdly, refocus on Jesus. It is fascinating to me that the climax of the creation story is not the creation of human beings. It is day seven. Day seven is a day of rest. What does that symbolise? It relativises the importance of work. Work is not the be-all and end-all of our existence. Worship is what it is about.

For more audio reflections with transcripts, visit <http://advent.arochoa.org.uk>. You can register for daily notifications.

Christmas The story of mince pies

Did you know that mince pies have been traditional English Christmas fare since the Middle Ages, when meat was a key ingredient? The addition of spices, suet and alcohol to meat came about because it was an alternative to salting and smoking in order to preserve the food. Mince pies used to be a different shape - cradle-shaped with a pastry baby Jesus on top.

How odd

Christmas is weird - what other time of the year do you sit in front of a dead tree and eat sweets out of your socks?

THE WAY I SEE IT : The pivotal importance of the Middle East

It's astonishing how the epicentre of world news has always seemed to be what we call the 'Middle East'. Ever since history was first recorded, these lands have been its backdrop: great civilisations and powers, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, and Persia occupied the world's centre stage, sometimes for centuries. When they were replaced, it was usually by another one of that short list.

The world's two greatest religions, Christianity and Islam, were born here, offspring of a smaller but even older one, Judaism. These very lands were the site of the Garden of Eden, the poetic source and beginning of the whole human story. Sadly, these lands have also been marked out as battle-fields – and the apocalyptic message warns that they will be the site of the final

great conflict, Armageddon. Today our TV screens are full of images of devastated towns and cities, destroyed by bombing and shelling. Is this not only the history but also the fate of the Middle East?

But now comes Christmas, and we hear a different message echoing from the same region. It was first heard in a field outside Bethlehem: 'Peace, goodwill among people'. The child who was born in a stable in the Middle East nearly 2000 years ago was to be known as the 'Prince of Peace'. He came, the Bible says, to 'preach peace to those who are near, and peace to those who are far off'.

This is the great paradox. In the midst of conflict, in a land that had suffered enemy occupation for 300 years, there came a message of

peace. Hard to hear over the noise of battle, but insistent, it will surely prove in the end to be the greatest gift that these much-abused lands have offered to the world.

100 Club Winners

Draw for September 2015

1st prize: Maureen Paddock
2nd prize: Carol Kenning
3rd prize: Rosie Price Timmins
4th prize: Carol Kenning

Draw for October 2015

1st prize: Pat (The Centurion)
2nd prize: Wendy Shale
3rd prize: Berti the dog
4th prize: PJ (The Centurion)

Its time to renew your annual membership so please talk to Mark Williams as you could miss out on a prize if you haven't paid!

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Farewell from Uncle Eustace

The Rectory
St. James the Least

My dear Nephew Darren

And so, at the beginning of the New Year, you finally go to your own first parish and I am to move to a home for retired clergy. Let me give you some final words of advice.

Curates, you will have noticed, are forgiven everything. I hope you have appreciated this period of grace, because come 1st January, all that will change. You will then become responsible for everything that goes wrong in your church. You must be able to mend leaking taps, arrange flowers, mow the churchyard and run jumble sales. You will be expected to know the moment someone falls ill – preferably the day before. In addition, they will expect you to preach profound sermons - in seven minutes flat, and to lead a life of prayerful solitude while being the life and soul of the parish. From the day your predecessor left, he will have turned into a saint. You will be their new disappointment. Be assured that whatever you do, you will always disappoint someone.

Be prepared for phonecalls at 3am telling you that someone has left a light on in church, and shouldn't you go turn it off. You will be asked about car parking arrangements for the October Harvest Service by mid-January, while hymns for the 9 Lessons and Carols will be required by early summer. I suggest you buy in extra pullovers, overcoats and scarves for life in your vicarage. A good number of mousetraps may well come in useful too.

Welcome to your new life of an incumbent.

I, on the other hand, greatly relish the thought of no longer having the care of parishioners. Instead, I shall become one myself – and am already planning my revenge. In fact, this afternoon, inspired by a large glass of sherry, I have begun a list of things I can complain about. The church is too cold, I don't know any of the hymns, the vicar can't preach, he never visits, and things are not as good as they used to be. True, I haven't actually chosen my new church yet, but no matter, I will complain when I get there.

Of course, I will not be in church on Sunday mornings if it is raining, or on Sunday evenings if something good is on the television. Most of all, I look forward to sitting as far back in church as is possible, and starting a campaign to stop 'passing the peace'.

My new life as a parishioner will be richly rewarding. 50 years after ordination, I can hardly wait.

Your loving uncle,

Eustace

Santa's sleigh

I remember when Father Christmas nervously went for his sleigh-driving test. He came rushing back in a thunder of reindeer, and pulled up in front of the toy factory. 'Have you passed?' I asked.

Father Christmas pointed to the front of the sleigh. 'See for yourself!' he called proudly. 'No-el plates!'

Church Commissioners commit to disclosing carbon footprint

The Church Commissioners for England has announced that it has signed the PRI Montreal Pledge, an initiative that commits signatories to measuring and publicly disclosing the carbon footprint of their equity portfolio each year.

The Pledge was launched last year in Montreal during the annual conference of the Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI), which the Commissioners signed up to in 2010, and is also supported by the UN Environment Programme Finance Initiative (UNEP FI).

It aims to attract commitment from portfolios totalling US\$3 trillion in time for the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 21) in December 2015. At present, nearly 100 organisations, representing over US\$8 trillion, have signed the pledge.

Edward Mason, Head of Responsible Investment for the Church Commissioners, said: "Taking account of environmental issues is an intrinsic part of being a good long-term investor, and ahead of COP 21 in Paris, the opportunity to support this pledge couldn't have come at a more important moment."

Fiona Reynolds, Managing Director of the PRI, said "The Church Commissioners are leading advocates for the transition to a low carbon economy. Since the Commissioners became signatories to the UN-supported Principles for Responsible Investment in 2010, we have been encouraged by their commitment to responsible investing." The pledge is part of a series of initiatives taken by the Commissioners to encourage sustainability across their portfolio.

Farewell to Dad's Army ± 70 years on

'Dad's Army' has been one of the BBC's most popular sit-coms, its characters' catch-phrases universally known: 'Don't panic!', 'You stupid boy!', 'We're doomed!' It means that generations of TV viewers feel they know all about the Home Guard. This month marks the date of its final disbandment, on December 31st 1945, seventy years ago.

The Home Guard – originally the 'Local Defence Volunteers' – came into being in the summer of 1940, when the Nazi forces were encamped across the Channel,

waiting for orders to invade Britain. People were understandably nervous. Civilians clamoured to be given weapons so that they could defend their towns and villages.

In response, the Government began recruiting local volunteers – men who already possessed weapons (farmers with shot-guns, typically) and others who could make and use 'Molotov cocktails' – petrol bombs. The new prime minister, Winston Churchill, wanted something more recognisably military, and at his insistence these volunteers were mobilised in a 'citizen

army' which he called the Home Guard. The Government expected about 150,000 volunteers – within a month there were 750,000.

Over the war years these men (and later a few women) who were either too young or too old for military service or deemed unfit for it, guarded air fields and strategic buildings, manned coastal look-outs, and watched for enemy parachutists, freeing regular soldiers for combat duties. Even so, 1206 members of the Home Guard were killed 'in action', mostly by bombs or rockets. Dubbed 'Dad's Army' at the time, their contribution to final victory was certainly no joke.

Launch of major new report on how the C of E manages its 16,000 churches

As part of its Reform and Renewal programme, which was debated in the General Synod in February, the Church of England has now published a report and launched a consultation on proposals to improve support for its 16,000 church buildings.

The report is the first attempt in many years to undertake a comprehensive review of the Church of England's stewardship of its church buildings. It includes a wide range of statistics, a substantial theological reflection and a survey of various initiatives being taken in individual dioceses. It identifies a number of principles that should shape the Church's approach and makes some specific recommendations.

The report comes from the Church Buildings review group, chaired by the Bishop of Worcester, the Rt Revd Dr John Inge. Certainly the group found some big challenges: more than three quarters of the

Church of England's churches are listed, and the Church of England is responsible for nearly half of the grade I listed buildings in England. More than half of churches are in rural areas (where 17% of the population lives) and more than 90% of these are listed.

Bishop John says: "Our 16,000 church buildings are a visible sign of ongoing Christian faith in communities throughout England, as well as being an unparalleled part of our country's heritage. This report looks at how we can best support the thousands of local volunteers who care deeply for and about churches and offer wonderful service to their communities using their churches.

"There is no single solution to the challenges posed by our extensive responsibility for part of the nation's heritage. We hope therefore that this work will be a catalyst for discussion." The consultation period runs until Friday 29 January

New church legacy film

The Church of England has launched a new, short film which shows how gifts in wills can help to transform the lives of churches and communities. 'A Lasting Difference', features three inspiring case studies from parish churches where gifts have enabled opportunities for mission: from new church halls, to hiring a youth worker, to improving disabled access.

John Preston, National Stewardship Officer for the Church of England, said: "The call to Christian stewardship doesn't just apply to our church and charitable giving - we're called to be generous in all of our giving throughout life and at the end of life. The Church of England encourages its members to give 5% of their income to the local church and a similar amount to charities that the Lord puts on their hearts."

The film provides helpful support and advice to PCCs on how to en-

Hymns and Readings

6th December Advent 2

Readings Malachi 3: 1-4
Canticle Benedictus
Philippians 1: 3-11
Luke 3: 1-6
Hymns 14 The Advent of our God
18 Ye servants of the Lord
7 Hills of the North
16 Wake O wake

Sidesperson: Monica Sarpong
Readers: Rob Nesbitt, Nicky Pittam
Intercessions: Bill Saunders

14th December Advent 3

Readings Zephaniah 3: 14-end
Canticle Isaiah 12
Philippians 4: 4-7
Luke 3: 7-18
Hymns 6 Hark the glad sound
5 Hark a herald voice
9 Lo he comes
8 Lift up your heads

Sidesperson: Bill Saunders
Readers: Ruth Godwin, Stephen Nicoll
Intercessions: Carol Kenning

20th December Advent 4

Readings Micah 5: 2-5a
Canticle Magnificat
Hebrews 10: 5-10
Luke 1: 39-45
Hymns 186 Tell out my soul
17 When came in flesh
19 Come thou redeemer of the earth
10 Long ago prophets knew

Sidesperson: Rob Nesbitt,
Readers: Joe McKenzie, Denise Sealy
Intercessions: Lucy Boyd

27th December St John the Evangelist

Readings: Exodus 22: 7-11a
Psalm: 117
1 John 1
John 21: 19b-end
Hymns Angels from the realms of glory
40 What child is this
See amid the winters snow
39 Unto us a boy is born

Sidesperson: Nick Bethune
Readers: Mark Williams, Lucy Boyd
Intercessions: Bill Saunders

courage this area of Christian giving. Certainly gifts in wills are a valuable source of income to parishes, with around £50 million being left to churches each year. Proceeds are used to finance mission projects, maintain church buildings and grow church communities.

Spotlight on social and emotional intelligence in Church schools

There is no such thing as a neutral education. So says the Church of England in a recently published discussion paper which explores what character education should look like in schools.

The paper, from the National Education Office, also suggests that development of character should see the development of intellectual, spiritual, moral and physical attributes. It adds that education is not just about producing increasingly efficient economic units: it is about developing people who can flourish in all areas of their lives.

The paper has been written in partnership with the

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, based at Birmingham University. It aims to offer some key questions on what character development may look like in schools and how this might be received by Christians and those of other faiths and none.

Earlier this year the Church of England received a Character Education grant from the Department for Education to pilot work on character education in the classroom. The project is piloting 'What If Learning', a cross-curricular model developed by an international partnership of educators.

Rudolph the Red

There was once a great Czar in Russia named Rudolph the Red. He stood looking out the windows of his palace one day while his wife, the Czarina Katerina, sat nearby knitting. He turned to her and said, "Look my dear, it has begun to rain!" Without even looking up from her knitting she replied, "It's too cold to rain. It must be sleeting." The Czar shook his head and said, "I am the Czar of all the Russias, and Rudolph the Red knows rain, dear!"

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For your prayers

PRAYER CALENDAR FOR MONTH OF DECEMBER 2015

6th Mortimer Terrace
13th Spencer Rise
20th Twisden Road
27th Wesleyan Place

SAINTS & HOLY DAYS

1st Charles de Foucauld
3rd Francis Xavier
4th St John of Damascus
6th Advent 2
7th St Ambrose of Milan

8th Conception of the Blessed Virgin
Mary
9th Margery Kempe
13th Advent 3
14th St John of the Cross
20th Advent 4
24th Christmas Eve
25th Christmas Day
26th St Stephen
27th St John the Evangelist
28th Holy Innocents
29th St Thomas Becket