LINK

The magazine for the Diocese of Newcastle

SPRING 2026

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Link and Link Extra

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A message from Bishop Mark

'Earth Shattering'

I am a relatively enthusiastic person. Some might say overly so. The kind of person who uses too many exclamation marks in emails and writing! I also use a lot of hyperbole or exaggeration, in conversation. But please know you genuinely are amazing and wonderful!

However, I have noticed that living in a world of 'Presidential hyperbole', words and phrases like 'tremendous', 'amazing' or 'greatest of all time' start to lose their meaning. If everything is tremendous, then ultimately nothing is.

I am always intrigued at the ways the gospel writers try and describe the indescribable when it comes to Jesus' resurrection. The details of Good Friday are graphic and more easily imagined but when it comes to Easter Day the reality is harder to grasp. Mark doesn't even bother to describe Jesus' resurrection, if we accept his Gospel ends at chapter 16, verse 8. But Matthew gives it a good go:

> *And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. (Matthew 28.2-4)*

As well as this great earthquake, Matthew also records an earthquake at the moment when Jesus dies on the cross and the Temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27.51). The point of the two earthquakes is to highlight that Jesus' death and resurrection are two monumental, literally 'earth-shattering', events. It's not just the guards at the tomb who are shaking in fear, the very creation trembles before these great redeeming acts of God in Jesus Christ.

Today the news all around our world continues to be 'earth-shattering': wars, violence, prejudice and scandal, as well as the storms, floods and earthquakes which rock our world, part of the broader climate emergency. And there are a million more personal ways in which our own lives are rocked by illness, death, bereavement, breakdown and despair. In the face of such a multiplicity of tragedies and disasters, louder and louder exaggeration and over-enthusiasm are shown up for just how vain they can be.



Bishop of Berwick, Mark Wroe

Yet on Golgotha's hill and in the garden of the empty tomb the foundations of the world shake as God speaks through Jesus Christ in ways which overwhelm and overcome sin, death and evil: "He has been raised from the dead." (Matthew 28.7) The events of Good Friday and Easter Day are earth-shattering and world-redeeming. At the same time they are person-shaped and deeply grounded in human life – why else would the women encountering the risen Jesus in person fall to the ground and take hold of his feet (Matthew 28.9)?

You and I live in the light of this ground-breaking and earth-shattering reality. Our enthusiasm stems from believing and trusting in this indescribably good news. Incidentally at its root, the word 'enthusiasm' means 'inspired by God'. Perhaps I shouldn't worry about being enthusiastic!

As we lean into the season of Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, we live in the midst of earth-shattering and world-redeeming events. We won't always feel enthusiastic. But may we always be grounded in the reality of our faith, taking hold of the person of Jesus Christ, whether in times of fear or joy, for he has been raised from the dead!

Bishop Mark

Bishop's appeal raises vital funds for The People's Kitchen

Bishop Helen-Ann has hailed a diocesan campaign which raised vital funds for vulnerable people.

The Bishop's Christmas Appeal was launched back in November in aid of The People's Kitchen, the Newcastle-based charity that supports people who may be homeless, unemployed, lonely or living in poverty.

People across our diocese made generous donations to the appeal, which ran well into the New Year. Churches held fundraising events such as carol services and coffee mornings and some also donated food, clothes and toiletries.

After a grand total of £2,938.96 was confirmed, Bishop Helen-Ann said: "I have been very heartened to see so many people embracing the latest Christmas Appeal. A huge thank you to everyone who has contributed.

"The People's Kitchen has supported vulnerable people for 40 years. This remarkable charity continues to provide hot meals and other essential items, such as sleeping bags, clothing and toiletries for those who need them.

"It's a huge commitment by dedicated volunteers every single day. The appeal has not only raised vital funds to support this essential work, it has also helped to raise awareness of all that The People's Kitchen is doing to change the lives of people who are homeless and vulnerable."



Bishop Helen-Ann in the well-stocked storeroom

The People's Kitchen was founded in 1985 by the late Alison Kay, after being shocked by news about the death of a homeless man. She began taking out teas and coffees, but within a year, Alison had built a growing community.

Backed by a team of volunteers, Alison opened The People's Kitchen to support the homeless with food, clothing and a warm fire for anyone who needed it.

For her work, Alison received an Honorary Degree from Newcastle University in 1997. She passed away in 2001, aged 91, but her legacy remains.

Today, The People's Kitchen serves more than 250 meals every day – 365 days a year. There's a family atmosphere at the charity's building, on Bath Lane, where people who use the service are called friends and not 'service users'.

They are free to chat to each other or enjoy quiet time if they wish. Volunteers are on hand to offer friendly conversation and valuable support. In some cases, friends have given back to the charity by volunteering themselves, after successfully turning their lives around.

Jackie Boardman, a Trustee at The People's Kitchen, said: "The People's Kitchen would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who has donated and to Bishop Helen-Ann for her valued support. The kindness and generosity of the people of the North East is what enables us to continue this vital work, helping to make people's lives a little brighter each day."



Volunteers preparing food for friends

Welcoming our four new Canons



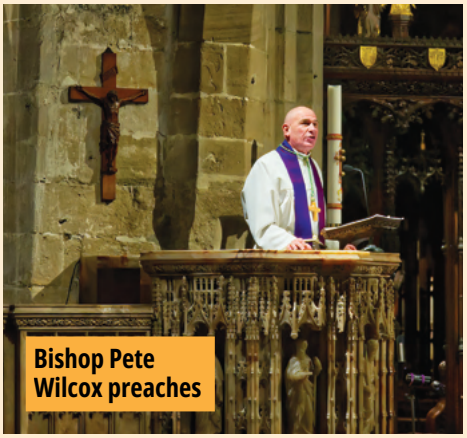
From left: The Revd Emily Emmerson-Finch, The Revd Dr Hannah Cleugh, The Revd Nigel Taylor, The Very Revd Lee Batson, Bishop Mark Wroe, Jacqueline Atkinson, Chris Elder and Bishop Pete Wilcox



The Canons kneel before Bishop Mark

Four new Non-Residentiary Canons were installed at Newcastle Cathedral, on Saturday 6 December.

The Revd Dr Hannah Cleugh, The Revd Nigel Taylor, Jacqueline Atkinson and Chris Elder were installed during the Patronal Festival of St Nicholas by the Bishop of Berwick, Mark Wroe, while the Bishop of Sheffield, Pete Wilcox preached.



Bishop Pete Wilcox preaches



Friendship in Grief volunteers Val Wootton, Jacqui Wyness and Grace Hutchins

Bringing friendship and hope through church-run centre in Cramlington

Church volunteers in Cramlington are playing their part in supporting people who have lost loved ones.

Friendship In Grief provides a warm and welcoming environment for those who have suffered a bereavement and need support in coming to terms with grief.

The initiative is based at the Hope Centre, which is a social ministry hub of St Nicholas' Church. It takes place every Tuesday afternoon and is run by church volunteers Grace Hutchins, Jacqui Wyness and Val Wootton.

The volunteers have all experienced loss at different times in their lives. They have been involved with other bereavement groups and have relevant skills.

"We are here to support anyone who needs this service," said Grace. "Grief affects people in different ways. We have people who want to talk about their loss and we have people who want to spend time with others who have also experienced bereavement.

"It's a place to talk and to listen but also a place to socialise and to have some quiet time if needed. We are here to support that in a pleasant environment with a cup of tea or coffee."

Jacqui said: "There are a range of people who come to us and their circumstances vary. It's hard for young people when they lose parents and siblings and for people of any age when they lose a partner.

"We provide a safe space and want people to feel cared for. They can come here and talk to us in confidence. It is non-judgemental and is open to people of all faiths and none.

"We are a community and it's not all doom



Food bank volunteers Angela Sheret and Rhona Simpson with project manager Lorraine Alexander

and gloom. People talk about their holidays and other things. They support each other and quite often become friends."

The Hope Centre provides a base for Cramlington Parish to provide for the community and to plant the seeds of faith.

It also hosts the Cramlington Food Bank, which is part of the national Trussell Trust network of food banks. It has 43 local volunteers and relies on contributions from members of the public and businesses. It also works closely with local supermarkets, which give generously and act as donation points.

One volunteer, Tom, said: "I started coming here after I lost my wife. It has been a big help for me to be part of this community but we have a huge desire to help people, who in many cases are one pay cheque from poverty. Cramlington is a very giving place and everyone is so generous in supporting people in real need."

A volunteer-led uniform bank is also based at the Hope Centre. Through generous donations, pre-loved school uniforms and other items, including coats, shoes, socks and underwear, are washed, recycled and made available for all parents who need them for their children.



Volunteers Pat Young and Diane Oliver sort children's clothes at the Uniform Bank

The Hope Centre's Lorraine Alexander, who is also Parish Safeguarding Officer at St Nicholas' Church, said: "Our volunteers enable the Hope Centre to function and to offer these absolutely vital services for the community. They are incredibly dedicated to their work and make a difference to the lives of so many people. We are eternally thankful for all they do."

● **For more information visit: www.cramlingtoncofe.org/hope-centre**

St Aidan's Way

New pilgrimage following in the footsteps of St Aidan gets underway

Pilgrims from across our diocese and beyond descended on Holy Island to begin an exciting new walking initiative.

They walked 21km (just over 13 miles) from Lindisfarne Priory to Belford on Saturday, 7 March. It was the first stage of St Aidan's Way, a series of walks which will take place from March to October this year between Holy Island and Newcastle Cathedral.

As part of our Year of Sharing, Bishop Helen-Ann, the Very Revd Lee Batson, and the Revd Canon Dr Sarah Hills were delighted to launch the event, which is embracing the spirit of St Aidan, the founder of Lindisfarne Priory who restored Christianity to Northumberland.

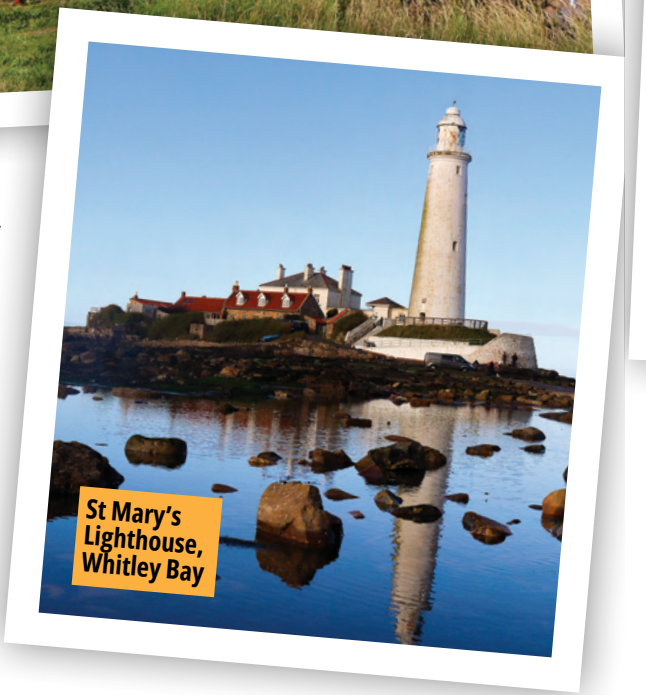
Known as the Apostle of Northumbria, Aidan's message underlined the message of reconciliation at the heart of the Gospel. Our journey, like Aidan's, will be an opportunity to share in prayer, walking and listening together.

Using pre-existing footpaths and walking routes, the pilgrimage offers an opportunity to explore the splendour of our coastal landscape and share together in reflecting on how we might witness faithfully to God's work in our diocese and region.

The first stage got underway after a short Eucharist service on Holy Island, where Bishop Helen-Ann presided.

The Dean of Newcastle, Lee Batson said: "St Aidan went out with humility, gentleness and patience. He had a real sense of caring for the vulnerable people he met. We want to walk in the spirit of St Aidan and we thank all who were able to join us for what was a memorable first stage.


Alnmouth


St Mary's Lighthouse, Whitley Bay

"As we progress through the schedule, this is a great opportunity to highlight what is out there within our parishes as the pilgrimage passes through each stage."

Each stage of the event starts with an act of worship, which determines a theme for discussion and prayer during each stage of St Aidan's Way. There are also prayer stations along each route where practically possible.

Lee added: "It's about exploring this beautiful tidal route, taking time to rest and be at one with God, going out into the world and sharing that peacefulness. The joy of a coastal route is that it is quite flat. There are pre-existing footpaths, which make it as accessible as possible."


Lindisfarne Priory


Warkworth Castle

The inaugural St Aidan's Way pilgrimage is a trail for what is hoped will become an established route. Much work went into planning each stage to ensure they are manageable distances for each day.

Here is the full schedule :

March 7 - Holy Island (Lindisfarne Priory) to Belford – 21km
April 11 – Belford to Seahouses – 16km
May 2 - Seahouses to Craster – 16km
June 6 – Craster to Warkworth – 21km
July 11 – Warkworth to Cresswell – 17km
August 11 – Cresswell to Ashington – 24km
Sep 12 – Blyth to Tynemouth – 15km
October 31 – Tynemouth to Newcastle Cathedral – 19km

● **To find out more visit: www.newcastle.anglican.org/st-aidans-way**

A Year of Sharing

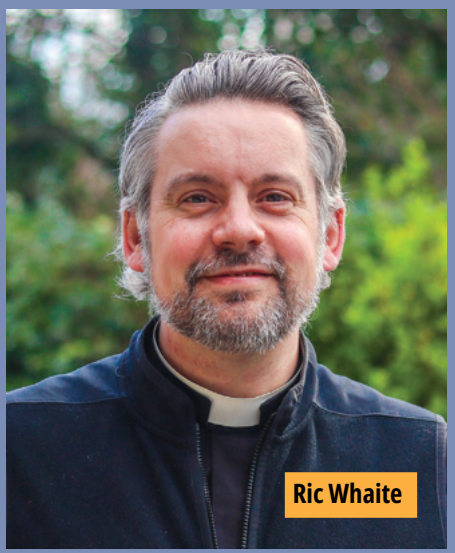
By Ric Whaite, Director of Mission and Ministry

The three words seeking, sharing, sending, have become a set of invitations to consider how we witness as Christians to God's loving work across our region.

Our Year of Seeking (2024-2025) centred on discerning how and where we noticed God working in our context. The responses and resulting reflection have prompted exploration of how we might support and enable one another to identify and develop the gifts, responsibilities and calling from God that we been given as Christians.

Our Year of Sharing centres on how we might enable one another to discover for ourselves how and where our faith is expressed. As we noticed or tried to pay attention in our Year of Seeking, so in our Year of Sharing we are looking for ways to listen to one another, helping one another to see God's work more clearly.

By sharing in this way, through initiatives like the St Aidan's Way pilgrimage, we hope to name some of the gracious ways in which God is with us and working with others.


Ric Whaite

New Year Honours List – OBE for education chief



Paul Rickeard OBE

Paul Rickeard, CEO at the Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Learning Trust, has been recognised in the 2026 New Years Honours list with an OBE.

Paul has worked in education for almost 24 years, most recently as CEO of the Trust working closely with 21 schools (soon to be 22) spanning eight local authorities, employing over five hundred staff but most importantly educating almost four thousand primary school age children.

All our schools are different, but they are all equally anchored in the community they serve making sure that every child matters and no one is ever left behind.

Prior to that he was Diocesan Director of Education for the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle.

Paul 51, married to Liane, is also a dad of three boys, Jack, Harry and Tom and stepdad to two girls, Holly and Tess.

Paul started his career in education as a teaching assistant in a secondary school in Newcastle and has since worked in several schools as a headteacher and then local leader in education. Paul currently sits on the CEO Advisory Group to the Department of Education.

Paul said: "I am really proud and honoured to be made an OBE. However, this award is also about the amazing teams and my family who have supported me throughout my life."

Born in Newcastle upon Tyne, Paul now lives in the small village of Acomb in Northumberland. When not working in the Trust he enjoys a gentle jog, walking his two dogs Meg and Simba and spending time with his family and friends.

'Tree of Hope' sapling planted at Henshaw Church of England Primary



Paul Rickeard OBE (CEO of the Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Learning Trust), Bishop of Newcastle, Helen-Ann Hartley, Mike Glenton (Headteacher of Henshaw CofE Primary) and four pupils with the sapling

A church school located less than three miles from Sycamore Gap has received a sapling from the world-famous tree.

Henshaw Church of England Primary is the closest school to the site of the sycamore on Hadrian's Wall, which was mindlessly chopped down by vandals in September 2023.

The school has become one of 49 recipients of a sapling, as part of the National Trust's 'Trees of Hope' initiative. It was planted on a hillside within a play area at the school, which is part of the Durham and Newcastle Diocesan (DND) Learning Trust.

The Bishop of Newcastle, Helen-Ann Hartley, attended a special ceremony where she was joined by Paul Rickeard, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the DND Trust, and David Akers, Diocesan Director of Education. Other dignitaries present included Audrey Kingham, Executive Director of Children, Young People and Education at Northumberland County Council, as well as representatives of other school partners.

Bishop Helen-Ann said: "Sycamore Gap was a globally iconic tree, attracting visitors from different parts of the world, but it was a living presence for our region and the local community. I am delighted that its legacy will live on at Henshaw Church of England Primary, just a short distance from the original site on Hadrian's Wall, as a symbol of future growth for children, their families and the wider community."

Prior to the planting, children at the school embarked on a short procession carrying


The whole school comes together to celebrate the occasion


Paul Rickeard OBE and Bishop Helen-Ann plant the sapling

themed artwork. They sang a specially written song and took part in whole-school activities. In the future, they will be unveiling a giant community mosaic, which spells out 'Our Tree of Hope'.

Headteacher Mike Glenton said other activities on the day included a nature project. He added: "It's a privilege that our school was chosen to receive a sapling, which is for our whole community. This is a special piece of Sycamore Gap within our school grounds. Our children will nurture it and make new memories of a significant tree in our history. In years to come, we hope to see children sitting under the tree and playing around it, a fitting tribute to such a special part of our local community."

Andrew Poad, General Manager for the National Trust's Hadrian's Wall properties said: "It's wonderful to see one of the saplings from Sycamore Gap being planted here at Henshaw CofE Primary School. These trees represent hope and resilience, and by involving children in this project, we're helping them feel connected to nature and to the story of this iconic landscape."

Henshaw Primary received the sapling after working with many organisations over the past two years to remember and celebrate the life of the Sycamore Gap tree.

'Tree of Hope' saplings have been planted elsewhere in the North East. On 12 March, a sapling was planted at St Michael's, Byker, a church which has been transformed into a state-of-the-art community youth and community hub.



Henshaw CofE Primary School is one of 49 recipients of a 'Tree of Hope' sapling

Learning about Jesus 'Light



The Revd Canon Ruth Hulse leads a small group, describing the symbolism behind each part of the Christingle

More than 300 children from schools across our diocese were welcomed to Newcastle Cathedral for a special Christingle service on Wednesday, 21 January.

It was a wonderful occasion, which enabled the children to make an eco-Christingle, learn about Jesus as the 'Light of the World' and join together for some light-themed worship songs.



Susan White, Diocesan Youth Adviser, helps a pupil add red ribbon to her Christingle, representing the blood of Christ and love of God



During the service, each Christingle was lit



Pupils with their finished Christingles

of the World' at Christingle



Children add a tealight



Pupils are proud of their finished Christingles



The Revd Canon Ruth Hulse adds seeds to each eco-Christingle



An eager pupil joins in with group discussions



Jon Wright, Diocesan Youth and Children Enabler, and Susan White, Diocesan Youth Adviser, lead worship

Robin's role in keeping churches welcoming and energy efficient

It can be a difficult balance to strike – keeping people warm in church while meeting sustainability targets.

It's a challenge facing many parishes in Newcastle Diocese but the newest member of our Net Zero Team is here to help them do just that.

Robin Talbot was appointed as Renewable Heating and Energy Adviser in November 2025, bringing a wealth of experience in his field, having worked with historic churches and medium-sized businesses in other parts of the country.

"I've been made very welcome," said Robin. "I'm getting to know the geography of our diocese and it's nice to hear the enthusiasm people have for their churches and the parishes and communities they serve.

"Most churches are on an eco-journey already and understand the environmental impact of their energy use. It's not necessarily about heating the building as a whole. It's more efficient to focus on keeping the people warm as they use the building, while meeting sustainability targets.

"Each church is different. In some cases, a change might be needed sooner rather than later, but in others, they might have an energy efficient boiler with five or more years of life remaining. Either way, it's about having a discussion and putting a sustainable plan in place for the future."

Robin is happy to speak to parishes to discuss energy usage in their church and potential renewable heating options. He works closely with our Church Buildings Support Officer, Tim Lewthwaite, to understand wider changes being made to church buildings. The team can also signpost to potential funding streams to support moves to reduce energy use and emissions.

"For instance, instead of waiting for an old boiler to break down, we want to help churches plan and prepare for an energy efficient future," said Robin. "Who currently uses a particular church and how often? Is it a space used by the wider community? Could a change to the layout of the building reduce heating costs? These are all questions to be considered. We can also explore the issue of improving occupant comfort within a church building."

Originally from Ayr in Scotland, Robin undertook a PhD at the University of Brighton, which explored energy efficient heating options in historic churches. He later worked for the University of East London on a project that supported business enterprises with net zero targets and carried out research at the University of Nottingham.



Robin Talbot, Renewable Heating and Energy Adviser

Environmentally focused pupils are helping their classmates to learn about sustainable living and making a positive difference to our planet.

The Green Team is making a big impact at Archbishop Runcie Church of England First School in Gosforth.

Pupils from years 1-4 are represented on the team, having been nominated by their peers.

The team has planted a wildflower garden, which it enthusiastically helps to maintain, and has supported various environmental initiatives at the school and in the community.

These include encouraging parents to switch cars off while waiting outside during the school run and asking gardeners to leave a section of their lawn unmown, to boost biodiversity.

In addition, the Green Team has led collective worship at school, where they encouraged peers to be stewards of God's earth and advised their classmates that new food waste bins were to be introduced and the benefits of this to the planet. This is in line with the Government's recycling plan to separate food waste from landfill. The plan was introduced in 2023 and is now mandatory.

They have also learned about and raised awareness of Switch Off Fortnight, a national initiative that reminds people to switch off electrical items when they are not in use, to help save energy.

Headteacher, Kate Massey said the team had helped the school put in a bid for more trees, to further enhance the outdoor environment, which is used for Forest School and related Noticing Nature sessions.

She added: "Our children on the Green Team have been fantastic. They have shown a great willingness to learn but have also had a lot of fun while doing so and have done a great job of sharing it with their classmates and the wider school community.

Green Team makes a positive impact at school and beyond



The Green Team enjoyed a visit by Gill Booth and Sharon Betham of the Joint Education Team as they carried out environmental activities

"They have led worship, given superb presentations about their environmental work, and have encouraged all of us, where possible, to walk to school. This has all been enthusiastically received."

The Green Team was invited to attend a Net Zero Heroes event at Newcastle City Centre in February. Joined by other local schools, they represented Archbishop Runcie and submitted a summary of their work so far.

Kate added: "We're so proud of their commitment to making a positive difference to our planet."

The school, which is part of Gosforth's three-tier education system and accommodates nursery age to Year 4 pupils, extended its offering last year when it launched a playgroup for families with young children aged 0-3.

● **More information can be found at www.archbishop-runcie.eschools.co.uk**



Afternoon Church – growing a new worship community in Stamfordham

A whole new worship community is being built in Stamfordham as a result of an exciting family-focused initiative.

Afternoon Church is aimed predominantly at families with young children, although people of all ages are welcome to attend.

The late Sunday afternoon slot at St Mary's Church means a child-friendly version of traditional worship can be offered, followed by related craft activities and some tasty teatime treats, sometimes simple fruit and cake, but occasionally pancakes or homemade pizza.

The Revd Rachel Scheffer said the monthly services are growing in popularity, mostly due to individual conversations and one family at a time, rather than posters or social media. There are now 37 families linked to the service.

"We are having a lot of fun," explained Rachel. "There's a wonderful social atmosphere and it's a very engaging environment for the children. Parents, grandparents and other relatives are also coming along and getting involved.

"At the same time, this is still traditional worship but we are filtering it down to the most important aspects. It is Anglican worship in the right order. We gather, we say we are sorry, we hear that we are forgiven and hear a Bible story, we pray and praise."

Rachel said the initiative grew out of a pet blessing service in January 2024, which attracted more than 50 dogs, a bearded dragon and their owners.

She explained: "We knew we wanted to create a worshipping community for people that traditional worship didn't attract or serve. The pet blessing was fabulous but we felt called the next month to provide something for young families as a one off. That became the group we felt God calling us to get to know.

"We wanted to build a new worship community and Afternoon Church is doing that. We are attracting many families who wouldn't normally come to church. The pet blessing service remains an important part of our church calendar but that is now an annual event."



Children enjoyed food and activities at Afternoon Church

There was a Lent theme for Afternoon Church in February. It focused on 'Walking with Jesus our friend' on the journey through Lent in a friendly, creative way that included storytelling, song and interactive activities.

Children and adults enjoyed 'ashing' – where anyone willing could receive the sign of the cross on their foreheads as a symbol of walking with Jesus through Lent.

The afternoon also included a pancake party,

Not a huge commitment – but an important one

Ahead of the Deanery Synod elections this spring, John Appleby appeals for more people to consider getting involved.

At your parish annual meeting this spring, please consider standing for your Deanery Synod, to fill all the places available and to ensure our local and national debates are as representative as possible. You'll have three or four meetings each year and membership of your PCC too, so it's not a huge commitment, but it's an important one.

Liz Hayes, of Tynemouth Deanery, said: "I have been a member of Tynemouth Deanery Synod for a couple of years and found it to be interesting and informative on several levels. A lovely bonus too is to meet up with friends from other churches whom you do not see very often. In these very challenging times for all churches it is really helpful to understand the 'bigger picture', how clergy are to be deployed in the coming years, the increasing role of lay people, how we tackle issues including looking after our buildings and share good practice of things that work for different churches. There are real opportunities to collaborate around resources and activities. I commend it to anyone who is interested in community engagement and team working."

Another important role for members of Deanery Synods is to elect our diocesan representatives to General Synod – the national body that debates major changes to our doctrine and practice. This summer, elections will take place for three lay members of Synod. Major current issues facing the Church of England include Christian nationalism, poverty, safeguarding, the environment, and marriage and personal relationships. We don't all agree on the best way forward but we should all try to respect each other and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we move forwards.

The parish is the heart and soul of the Church of England. But the deanery has become more significant in supporting each other, sharing ideas and collaborating. Deanery Development Groups have been working on this and will continue to explore ideas that will go beyond survival to growth.

If you're a member of a Deanery Synod, you'll contribute to these significant discussions about our future. If you're not there, you'll be leaving those decisions to others. Please do seriously consider whether you can take on this important role.

John Appleby, of Tynemouth Deanery, is a member of Bishop's Council and former member of General Synod.





with children allowed to spread on their own sweet and savoury toppings.

Afternoon Church has been introduced to complement traditional Sunday morning services at St Mary's.

Rachel added: "It's ideal for families with young children but they're also a good way for anyone interested in coming to church to get involved. It's a real community, with worship and learning for all, but it's also a social occasion. There's always tea and coffee and an opportunity to speak to different people."

● **For more information email r.scheffer@newcastle.anglican.org or visit Upper Pont Churches on both Facebook and Instagram.**

English lessons for asylum seekers and refugees

Refugees and asylum seekers have often fled from unimaginable trauma due to persecution, war or violence in their home countries.

As Christians, we do all we can to offer a warm welcome to them – but the language barrier is among many challenges they face on arrival in the UK.

For almost a decade, two churches in Ashington have worked in partnership to deliver English lessons, which can be a game changer in helping people find homes, jobs and moving on with their new lives.

Holy Sepulchre and St Andrew's run the weekly Learning English Together (LET) Project, with a team of volunteer teachers offering English, and occasional maths when needed.

The Revd Chris Groocock said: "A key responsibility is to work with refugees and asylum seekers in a way which exercises their personal, spiritual and social needs.

"But we are not trying to evangelise here.



Sessions include learning about British culture, heritage and food

The Bible tells us to love a stranger and offer hospitality. It is missional rather than evangelical. It is open to all and no Christian faith is needed.

"The initiative has been a huge success over the years. Most of the people we serve are incredibly appreciative. Some of them even stay with us after they learn the language and join our team of teachers."


Volunteers provide phonics and reading support

It all started in 2016/17 when Chris and his then curate at Holy Sepulchre, the Revd Joanna Porter, attended a talk at Newcastle Cathedral about helping refugees. As more refugees were coming into Ashington at that time, they wanted to offer something to help.

With resources provided by Action Foundation's Action Language initiative, the church project got underway. It ranged from the basics, such as apple, orange and pound coin, to more advanced English words and phrases.

Now the initiative supports between 20 and 50 people each week – both refugees and asylum seekers. Volunteer teachers come from all walks of life and some are over the age of 80.

Chris, who oversees the project alongside the Revd Sam Lochead, is thankful for the





Visual resources support the acquisition of English

dedication of the teachers who volunteer every week and without whom the project couldn't function.

Chris said the role of co-ordinator is also a crucial one, with key responsibilities including safeguarding, referrals, references etc. He is grateful for the tireless work of Joanne, who served as the original co-ordinator, her successor Ann Murray and current co-ordinator Martin Wright.

The project has received support from the Partners in Community Action (PICA) fund, churches in the Morpeth Deanery, as well as from Ashington Churches Together.

"I'm so proud of it," he added: "It's a wonderful thing to see and be part of. We don't ask any of the asylum seekers or refugees why they are here. It is private to them but it is rewarding to spend time with them. We learn about their cultures too."

● **Anyone interested in finding out more should email chrisgroocock@hotmail.com**

Bishop's blessing for exciting new era of education


Bishop Mark blessed the school during a special ribbon-cutting ceremony

Bishop Mark has blessed a new school set-up which is catering for mainstream pupils and those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

The Tweed has opened as a new special school as part of St Mary's Church of England First School in Berwick. It is based on the first school site and was commissioned as part of a restructure of Berwick Educational Partnership into a two-tier structure.

Bishop Mark, the Bishop of Berwick, visited the site at the end of February, where he was joined by local vicar, Fr Lee Taylor, as well as school pupils and staff. There was a special ceremony where Bishop Mark cut the ribbon to officially open the new school, where he blessed the new era for education there.

Headteacher Gary Hilton said: "The Tweed was opened by the Bishop of Berwick along with members of the school council, after a celebration event, which included a video of the journey the school had been on over the last 12 months during the construction of the new school, and finally a blessing from the Bishop that was gratefully received by all in school."

Building work has been carried out to accommodate four extra classrooms, whilst also providing access to sensory and therapy rooms, as well as rooms for external support services including occupational and speech therapists.

Outdoors the children can enjoy forest school areas, a multi-use games area, and in the summer a new wild meadow exploration area, alongside designated outdoor play spaces linked to each classroom.

Mr Hilton added: "The provision provides the opportunity for children to receive specialist support and interventions, whilst also having the chance to access appropriate mainstream learning experiences, whether that be in the classroom or the playground. This integrated approach is designed to nurture the strengths of each individual child, whilst providing specialist support in areas of identified needs.

"The Tweed represents an exciting expansion of specialist provision for primary aged children within the north of Northumberland, complementing existing strong inclusive practice across the area."

Transformative move puts children at the heart of church life

The nave of St Peter's Monkseaton has been remodelled to put children at the centre of their church community.

A subtle change to the layout of pews created a warm and welcoming space where they can be at the heart of worship.

The Revd Canon Dr Hannah Cleugh, vicar at St Peter's, has described the move as significant both in theological and practical terms.

"It really has been transformative in ways we hadn't imagined," said Hannah. "People come into the building and see the area and smile. We've had so many positive comments about it and it is wonderful to see whole families enjoying the space.

"To create the space in the middle of what was a very inflexible nave, with permission from the Archdeacon, we removed one pew and rearranged a couple of others. It gives clear expression to the welcome we want to extend to children, as they are now literally at the heart of our worship."

Previously, the choir vestry had been used as creche space during the Sunday service but that had not been ideal.

"There were practical difficulties with the arrangement," explained Hannah. "But much more importantly we felt it was sending out the wrong message - we don't want to be sending children (and their grown-ups) out of the service. If we do that, how are they to learn what it means to be part of the whole life and worship of the church?"

The Revd Francesca Walsh, curate at St Peter's, said: "On a practical level, and in terms of worship, it makes sense to have the children at the centre. We knew what we wanted to achieve and why, and thought hard about it."





The new facility for children has become a centrepiece at St Peter's



The new set-up is helping to build inter-generational relationships within the congregation and it is now much easier for families to become integrated into the life of the church. The area, which is carpeted for comfort, has books, toys and resources to help families engage with the worship.

Hannah added: "Hospitality is about making space. We believe in a God who welcomes us in, welcomes us to the table. One comparatively simple change to the building has freed us to offer that welcome so much more effectively to families, so that hopefully they can experience the love of God and know that they really do have a place at the heart of God's church."

Running – a Lenten challenge to boost fitness and support good causes

A priest has taken on a Lenten challenge which will see her run a combined total of 140k (87 miles).

The Revd Stephanie Keates, Priest in Charge at St Aidan Billy Mill and St Hilda Marden with Preston Grange, will take on the Great North 10k in Newcastle, in July.

As part of her training schedule, Stephanie built-in a series of other runs. It started during Advent, when she ran an accumulative 40k in aid of St Aidan's Billy Mill. She followed this up in February with 50k in aid of St Hilda's North Shields.

In May, Stephanie, who is also a Fire Service Chaplain, will run a combined total of 40k in aid of the Fire Fighters Charity, which supports serving and retired firefighters with physical, mental and social wellbeing.



The Revd Stephanie Keates



Stephanie, who is originally from Witney in Oxfordshire and grew up in North Somerset, hopes she will be in peak fitness by the time she embarks on the Great North 10k in July, in support of Newcastle Diocese.

"I enjoy running," said Stephanie. "It's a good way to exercise and to get out exploring the parishes and God's creation around where I live. It helps me in my life and faith, which has very definitely felt like a long journey, not least because it started geographically 'down south'."

Stephanie got back into running in 2020 when running with an old school friend. They started the Couch to 5k programme and she successfully completed it last autumn. In 2025, she intended to run in aid of Refuge, a charity that supports women and children experiencing domestic violence, but ended up postponing it on medical grounds after suffering from severe toothache. Instead, she is running during Lent 2026 for the same charity.

Nevertheless, a conversation with Bishop Helen-Ann, a fellow running enthusiast, was just what Stephanie needed to keep on track. It also inspired her latest challenge.

She explained: "I signed up for the Great North 10K and have added the other runs into my schedule to build up my stamina and distance."

"I also wanted to set a good example. During Lent, I was suggesting to my congregations that our Lenten disciplines aren't just for that season but to help us in our journey of faith throughout the year.

"I like the idea of supporting different causes. It gives people a choice when they donate in terms of which cause is closest to their heart. I'd like to say a huge thank you to everyone who has contributed so far, even the smallest amount makes a difference."

● To make a donation visit: https://givealittle.co/c/stephaniesrunning

Supporting families in the early years of parenthood

A service to support vulnerable families with babies and young children is now up and running with help from local churches and the wider community.

Baby Basics Alnwick has been established by the Christian charity Ignite. It is a regional hub of Baby Basics UK, providing essential items needed for parenting, including clothing, equipment and toiletries.

The new service was officially launched in December, attended by Bishop Helen-Ann and the Duchess of Northumberland, who cut the ribbon at a memorable ceremony.

St Michael's Alnwick and St Michael's Felton are among the local churches playing a key role. Church members are volunteering their time and skills to prepare Moses baskets full of items, which can make a huge difference to families in need.

They knit and craft baby clothing, wash and iron donated items, before preparing a first-class product, which is handed over as a gift.

Volunteer co-ordinator Jess McArdle said: "The Moses baskets also include baby toothbrushes, nappy cream, body wash, sleeping bags, snow suits and more. We put together newborn starter packs with items to support mums and dads in early parenthood.

"Everything is washed and prepared to look new. It is presented with a ribbon and we want it to look fresh and special. In the past, families might have received something second hand in a carrier bag from a charity. We want to move away from that.



Moses baskets are lovingly filled with newborn essentials



From left: Charlotte Bonnet; Claire Groves; Jess McArdle; Jane Percy, Duchess of Northumberland; David Smith MP; Bishop of Newcastle, Helen-Ann Hartley; and Councillor Geoff Watson, Mayor of Alnwick



Alnwick's Baby Basics' core team: Jess McArdle, Charlotte Bonnet and Claire Groves

"We are thankful to the local churches and their congregation members who are offering their time, skill and heartfelt dedication. Their generosity makes such a difference and without it, this wouldn't be possible."

Baby Basics Alnwick began operating two months prior to December's launch. It has a temporary base – a spare room at a property generously provided by a church member but with independent access. A permanent base is being sought.

Jess is part of a core team that also includes Charlotte Bonnett and Claire Groves. They previously visited Baby Basics UK's headquarters in Sheffield to find out exactly what was required to open a local hub.

In addition to around 15 volunteers, the service is well supported by the wider community who generously donate both money and items.

People can bring items to three donation points – St Michael's Alnwick, St Michael's Felton and The Queen's Head Hotel in Rothbury.

Jess added: "It has been a remarkable journey to get to this stage. We identified a need for this type of service and it is very heartening that we are now making a big difference for families who need us."

● **Baby Basics supports families with children age 0-5. For further information visit https://www.ignite-alnwick.co.uk/projects/baby-basics**

Retirement mission to bring a new community closer to its local church

Retirement is a big step for most people – but clergy who wish to remain active within the Church have much to offer. We value the contribution made to our witness and service by retired clergy in Newcastle Diocese.

The Revd Canon Janet Chapman was Rector of Northfield in Southwest Birmingham before she retired to Newcastle in 2023. Having also served in Darlington, she already had a connection to the North East but moving to Newcastle brought her closer to family.

However, there was another significant part of Janet's retirement plan that led her specifically to Wallsend – where over a thousand new houses have been built on the East Benton Rise and Fallow Park estates.



Janet Chapman out on the East Benton Rise and Fallow Park estates, and inset left, a card from one of the successful trails

Since moving to the area with her husband Peter, the couple have worked hard to establish links between the new community and its local church, St John's Wallsend, where Janet has Permission to Officiate and leads occasional services.

"To be part of a new community is something we both wanted to do in retirement," said Janet. "The estates are vibrant with lots of young families but there is no community building.

"We want people to know that there's a local church here for them, whether it be for weddings, baptisms and funerals or for something beyond that. It is sowing the seed."

Janet and Peter's outreach work has included regular social media posts about church and community activities, posters on lamp posts, leafleting, coffee afternoons, litter picking and community gardening.

They have organised numerous events, including carol singing, walks and seasonal initiatives, such as Easter crafts and a pre-Christmas posada during Advent. There have been poster-led pumpkin trails at All Saints for Halloween and hot cross bun trails for Easter.

Janet said one or two positive links are being made with community organisations, while she and Peter are well supported by volunteers and the Revd Canon Rae Caro, who is Mission Enabler for new estates in Tynemouth Deanery.

She added: "We've made some progress in 'keeping the rumour of God alive' on these estates. The lack of any community building is keenly felt. We try to raise the visibility of St John's Church, which is a mile away from the new estates and is on the other side of the busy Coast Road."

One positive result is a previously non-church going lady who moved to the area and was keen to get involved with local activities. She is now actively involved, helped to make Christingles and attended the Christingle service with her adult daughter.

Originally from Stockport in Cheshire, Janet studied geography at Durham University before working as a computer programmer for the Midland Bank in Sheffield. However, a life in ministry was always in the back of her mind, and after studying at Cranmer Hall, Janet was Parish Deacon at St Cuthbert's Darlington from 1987 to 1992.

Janet also served in Edinburgh and Yorkshire in both church ministry and school chaplaincies.

From 2001 to 2008, she was priest in charge at Banbury in Oxfordshire, before serving as Canon Liturgist and Pastor at Birmingham Cathedral from 2008 to 2016, and then as Rector of Northfield until her retirement in 2023.

Providing a place of worship and source of support for the vulnerable

Living the Lantern

By Jayne Forsdike, Cathedral Safeguarding Officer


Jayne Forsdike

"Safeguarding shines at the heart of the Diocese's life and work. As such, we are committed to the care and protection of all children, young people and vulnerable adults who visit, work or volunteer at our Cathedral." **A quote from Dean of Newcastle, Lee Batson.**

Since starting this role in October 2024, I have had the pleasure of getting to know clergy, staff, volunteers, congregation members and colleagues from across the Diocese. Their generosity and openness have helped me build a strong understanding of this new (to me!) Church context.

Before joining the Cathedral, I spent 30 years working in statutory services. Transitioning into an environment where people often wear multiple hats and where there are no direct equivalents to the teams and departments I was used to, has offered both stimulating challenges and valuable new perspectives.

One thing that continually impresses me is the Cathedral and Diocese's deep and visible commitment to safeguarding. We do not shy away from confronting the painful reality of church-based abuse and its lasting impact on victims and survivors.

This commitment is reflected in the Cathedral's ongoing display of the LOUDfence for survivors of church-based abuse and in hosting a Moral Injury Conference in 2025, led by the Diocesan Chaplaincy to Survivors. It was also a privilege for the Cathedral to exhibit 'Jagged Edges' — a powerful installation now on display at Canterbury Cathedral, coinciding with the Archbishop of Canterbury's installation.



Being a city-centre cathedral brings unique challenges in an area with high levels of deprivation, substance misuse, homelessness and domestic abuse. In response, we provide a place of worship and a source of support for some of the most vulnerable and marginalised in our city. In fulfilling this role, safeguarding is paramount – particularly as we regularly welcome school groups, families and choristers.

Throughout 2025, I focused on increasing safeguarding awareness, strengthening processes, delivering tailored training and supporting safer recruitment. I also reviewed the Safeguarding Committee to ensure broader partner representation. As a result, safeguarding is now more deeply embedded across cathedral life.

There will always be more we can do, as we continue to strive to provide a culture and environment where victims and survivors can report or disclose abuse safely and where they will find support and best practices that contribute to the prevention of abuse.

I never saw myself working anywhere other than within a statutory setting. Now a year on, the sense of purpose has exceeded my expectations. I'm so glad I took that leap of faith!