

Sunday 3rd May 2026

Leigh on Mendip with Downhead APCM

It is good to be reminded from time to time about all the good things which God is doing in our lives, in our church and community. This morning, after our Sunday worship, and a cup of coffee, we will be hosting our Annual Parochial Church Meeting – my first one as your Priest in Charge.

I would like to take the opportunity this morning to reflect a little on the Parish of St Giles, Leigh on Mendip with Downhead. Our strengths and challenges, what our hopes and aspirations might be for the future. I would also like to encourage us to have adopted some priorities for the next year and beyond.

Pause

Twelve months ago, I started to explore whether God might be calling me to leave High Wycombe to pastures new. Rachel and I felt drawn to the diocese of Bath & Wells, and so I began to explore the vacancies advertised on the diocesan website. At first I was rather overwhelmed by all the parish profiles and descriptions of different posts, but after I set aside some time to pray, a long list of possibles, became a short list, and subsequently I decided to apply for one post – the Benefices of Leigh on Mendip with Stoke St Michael & Postlebury.

Clearly a great deal of hard work was put into creating this parish profile, and it was all condensed into 19 pages which sought to summarise what I would be letting myself in for if I were to be appointed to the post, a little about each church, and your hopes and aspirations for the future.

I tried not to be swayed by the thought of living in a lovely village with a castle, or the appeal of having Thatchers Gold on tap at every local pub. Instead, I tried to focus upon what each of the churches and communities are like and the type of person you were hoping to appoint as your new priest.

In a nutshell, I hoped to find a Keith-shaped hole, somewhere, with help from God, and support from you all, I could make a difference, and lead the people and mission of God in this beautiful part of Somerset.

I noted in the profile that our churches have a strong team of dedicated volunteers, in many cases a small but hardworking team.

Both Leigh on Mendip and Downhead Churches have events and festivals that it does particularly well, each have links with the local community, and there are plenty of opportunities to grow and strengthen those links in the years ahead.

The Parish Profile stated that it was hoped that the new vicar would be visible in that local community, and would prioritise building links with the young, their families and schools, as well as encouraging our buildings to be used more widely by the local community.

So here we are, one year on from then! I have been in post for six months, and by now you should have an idea of what you have let yourself in for by appointing me to the post! It's too late to change your mind! Sorry about that!

Rachel and I were deeply moved by the warm welcome we received at my licensing service and since. There have been many highlights already for me within those six months – from well attended and joyful Christmas services, to the Harvest Auction, as I sat on a haystack in a barn on Green Farm bidding for delicious chutney, my first Plough Sunday evensong at Downhead with some visitors from our local farming community, to Bingo night in aid of the Friends of Leigh Church in the village hall next door, a delicious roast dinner in the Bell Inn with the PCC, to welcome Rachel and myself to the area, an amazing concert organised by Gus, in support of FOLC, and the recent churchyard clear up and Church spring clean – all of which were well supported by our wider community beyond regular church attenders.

It is also a privilege to chair our PCC, as we seek together to make wise decisions as good stewards of our two precious buildings, and to encourage the worship life and mission within the villages of Downhead and Leigh on Mendip.

I welcome every opportunity to engage with our local villages. Please do keep me informed of any local events which I could attend and invite me along! I will do my best to be available. I do try to keep abreast of local groups and events, and I have joined the mailing list for several local

newsletters, so hopefully I am now better informed than I was a few months ago!

Pause

Let us turn to God's word, by taking each of this morning's bible readings in turn, and drawing out of them some wisdom to inform our lives as Christians in the Parish of Leigh on Mendip with Downhead, and how that might encourage us to grow in our knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, to see spiritual and numerical growth and to impact this community with the love and light of God!

Beginning with our epistle reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 12, I have chosen this reading this morning, because it paints a powerful picture of what the body of Christ is like, and how it should function, and how you and I should treat one another.

Society places a great emphasis on independence, whereas in this passage we are reminded that the bride of Christ, the church is designed for inter-dependence – we are a diverse group of people, with different gifts, and we need one another in order to function as Christ has intended.

Verse 14, Paul declares:

The body does not consist of one member but of many

If someone is blessed with pastoral gifts they won't necessarily also be handy with a hammer, nails and a saw, or be able to bake a delicious cake!

Imagine how dull it would be if we were all the same! We can celebrate our diversity and we are only truly compete when we have one another. I wonder, do you know what your spiritual gifts are? Sometimes our friends are better judges than we are, especially if we are being too modest!

Spiritual gifts are given to us by God, in order to build up the body of Christ, the church. These include:

- Serving
- Teaching
- Encouragement
- Leadership

- Mercy
- Healing
- Prophecy
- Wisdom
- Administration
- Evangelism

That is not an exhaustive list, but it gives you some idea how God can equip us as a church.

So this biblical model of the Church suggests that God has given everyone gifts to use for the benefit of others, and to point people to Jesus.

As we seek to build up the church within our Parish – to feed, nourish and see growth within its members in our faith, we will then be better equipped to be able to share the hope that we have found in Jesus with others in our local community.

The church is most effective when individuals are given roles and responsibilities within the church which match their gifts. Now that might mean that someone shows potential in a particular area, and with experience they are able to grow into the role, but just as putting a square peg into a round hole doesn't make sense, neither does someone serving in a role which isn't a good match. It can hold the church back, and in some cases can harm the church.

Let me give you an example – we have lovely church welcomers here. However, imagine if someone wanted to be a church welcomer, but they never smiled, they were miserable and they never greeted or spoke to people when they came in, especially visitors. Imagine how you would feel if you arrived in a new church and you were greeted by someone with such a demeanour – I don't know about you but I would turn around and head back out again, and never darken the doors of the church ever again.

Did you also notice in our reading from 1 Corinthians that Paul emphasized how important it is to honour and care for the members of our church who are suffering, the weaker and more vulnerable members – we should honour them and support them, so that they would feel as valued as others. This is such an important point, and is a litmus test as to whether a church community is truly engaging with those in need – are we good news

to those who are lonely, are hurting, are broken, our really struggling day by day – the least, the last, the lost and the lonely.

Pause

I just have one verse to emphasize from the short Gospel reading from Matthew chapter 16, verse 24:

Jesus told his disciples, ‘ If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’

As followers of Jesus, all else is built upon the foundation of faith in Jesus Christ and adoption of the lifestyle which he himself lived and encouraged others to follow. A life of discipleship is a sacrificial life, in which we consciously choose to deny ourselves, pick up our crosses, and choose a route which will involve a cost to us all – it will involve suffering and pain, but also inexpressible joy, and life in abundance, as Jesus has promised us.

Pause

So before I bring my talk to a close, I would like to finish by encouraging us all to prioritise five things in the next few years, in order to build up the body of Christ in this Parish, and as we consider them, to seek to view them through the lens of sacrificial discipleship which was taught by Christ, as we seek to work together, as the body of Christ, with each person using the gifts that God has given them.

So here are our five key objectives as a parish:

- 1. To prioritise growing individually and together as followers of Christ, through regular Sunday attendance and nurture groups;**
- 2. To encourage more young families to be involved in the life of our Church;**
- 3. To forge stronger links with groups and individuals within our villages;**
- 4. To strengthen our links with our local schools;**
- 5. To develop some Sunday worship services which are more visitor and child friendly**

So those are a few thoughts for us to consider on this day as we mark our annual parochial meeting. I do intend to revisit these objectives regularly in the next year, and I, and all members of our PCC would welcome any suggestions you might have to make positive steps forward in any of these areas.

Although our primary focus today are the congregations of Leigh on Mendip and Downhead, it is good to be reminded that we are also informally linked with the benefice of Postlebury, as well as being linked with St Michael & All Angels, Stoke St Michael, all three churches being part of a single benefice.

Collaboration with our neighbouring benefice was something which was a positive bi-product of the vacancy after Fr Anthony retired – as the churchwardens formed a working group and all welcomed the opportunity to work closer together.

In the future I hope that will mean that we can continue to support one another, share good practice and see ourselves also as members of the wider church community in this area.

Amen

CLOSE

Keith Johnson