**Rector’s Annual Report March 2017**

**Connecting us and God**

God has blessed us all with a beautiful part of the world to live in; a great climate, fantastic beaches, waterways, and farmland! Our Parish covers around 1000 square Kilometres, and has 5 worship centres mostly in great condition! More importantly, are the people who faithfully meet at worship services at those 5 centres across the Parish, and the members of our communities with whom we would like to share God’s love.

My vision for our Parish is that *“We will connect meaningfully with our community in order to inspire hope and to transform lives through faith in Jesus”.*

We already do this well through: court care; our creative baptism services; the Dyer’s Crossing guild; the friendship group; our growth groups; men’s dinners; mini-lunch; our monthly St Alban’s BBQ; our Op-Shop; Rugrats; our Something Special Christian Bookshop; ToddlerTime; and the walking group (See individual reports for more details). All of these wonderful endeavours have the potential to share the Good News of Jesus even more meaningfully. We visit the elderly who are confined to their homes; we visit the nursing homes and the local hospital (Incidentally, some local denominations choose to not do these things so they can focus more effectively on growth in their churches). I believe that we *should* be doing these things as part of our responsibility to those in their twilight years (many who have been Christians nearly all their lives); and often the monthly church service is their only Christian input. Many of these great activities connect with the older members of our community/church, and so we need a renewed focus on early retirees, and younger families.

Many younger people in our community seem to lack a connection with God, and a certain hope of eternal life. They focus on healthy lifestyles, the accumulation of wealth, and happiness; but they feel that their lives are still missing something. Generally, people don’t talk about God or other big conversations about death, heaven or eternal life. As Christian people, we have an inspirational hope to offer others in our community; and that hope is centred in Jesus, and his death and resurrection!

A key focus of my ministry here in the parish will continue to be explaining God’s message to us from the Scriptures, in such a way that people with diverse backgrounds, needs, and learning abilities are able to understand His message and be transformed by it. I firmly believe the Scriptures are God’s Word of hope and love for us today. As we are transformed through faith in Jesus, we are then able to shine His love into our community so that others can see Him and have transformed lives through faith in Him. The more we understand the salvation we have received through faith in Jesus, and the more we understand how much God wants people to know Him, the greater will be our motivation/passion to share our faith with others.

In a parish of our size and diversity, we actually need a significantly larger ministry team. Currently, we have one full-time minister (me) and one part-time minister (Rev Bill Green). Many denominations would have this staffing level in a church with *one* Sunday service. On any weekend we have at least 5 services in three different buildings; and our geography prevents us from effectively combining each week in one location. Since arriving in the Parish, I have focussed on growing our Lay assistant base, and I am greatly encouraged by those who have come onto the team. However, our age demographic in the Parish is not reflective of the demographics of our community. We desperately need younger leadership in the ministry team, to help reach younger members of our community with the message of faith in Jesus.

Our church would be even more effective at engaging with our community, if we were able to attract suitably qualified, younger Stipendiary Lay Assistant/s to connect with families. Ideally, I believe we need a ‘church plant’ within our church, with about 3 to 4 families.

Our finances are somewhat limited, and so the options as I see them are:

1. Seek out people who would be willing to be employed part-time by our parish, and at the same time, have a part-time job in the community.
2. Seek out organisations external to the parish which could help fund position/s (e.g. BCA).
3. Use reserves to employ one family as a catalyst (About 2 years of employment before funds cease).
4. Manage our resources in a manner that will return sufficient funds to employ families.
5. Save finances until we have more money to employ families (perhaps 4 or 5 years of saving).

God initiates connection with us, and He wants us to then connect meaningfully with others so we can share His Gospel message of hope, love and forgiveness. Let’s continue to work together to grow God’s church here in our Parish: Individually, in our own hearts; corporately, as we serve and ‘hone’ one-another’s faith; and publicly, as we reach into our local community with the love of God so that people may have lives transformed by the Gospel.

**Meaningful services for diverse people**

With the introduction of contemporary worship services just over a year ago, our Parish now provides service styles for a wider range of people in our community. Traditional Anglican worship services, offering Holy Communion, a traditional liturgy, and hymns, have remained popular in the Parish. Over the past year Contemporary services have been steadily growing at Forster, with services at other centres (except Bungwahl) remaining steady in numbers. Those attending contemporary services enjoy connecting with God in a more relaxed and informal manner, enjoying contemporary Christian songs, children’s songs, and encouraging musical and artistic expression.

Our monthly combined worship services and parish BBQ are contributing to making stronger connections across our church communities. Let’s ensure that we all continue to pray for more growth.

***Forster***

Saturday evenings in the side chapel: After consultation with both the 5pm Contemporary and 6.30pm traditional services, it was decided to combine services at 5:30pm for a weekly Contemporary Holy Communion service – between 5 and 15 parishioners attend this service, depending on the time of year.

Sundays: 8am Traditional – Around 50-60 people meet weekly.

 9.30am Contemporary – Around 20-35 people meet weekly.

Many from both services meet with each other for a cuppa and a chat during morning tea between services.

***Tuncurry***

Sunday 9.30am Traditional – around 25-40 people meet weekly.

Thursday 9.30am Traditional – around 8 to 15 people meet weekly.

***Nabiac***

1st Sunday 5pm Contemporary – generally 12 to 16 attend.

3rd Sunday 11.30am Traditional – generally 12 to 16 attend.

***Dyers Crossing***

2nd Sunday 5pm Contemporary – generally 12 to 18 attend.

4th Sunday 11.30am Traditional – generally 15 to 20 attend.

The traditional services at all branch churches have continued with the same approximate numbers in attendance as before the changes, with the occasional visitor coming along. Contemporary services were placed at 5pm in an effort to be more accommodating of younger families, and whilst this has been better for them, unfortunately the younger families who have attended are very erratic in attendance. A number of regular parishioners who attend the contemporary branch churches services are struggling with the 5pm timeslot – especially in the dark at winter time. A change from 5pm to 11.30am for the contemporary services at branch churches is currently being investigated.

***Bungwahl***

1st Sunday 11.30am Traditional – generally 5 to 10 attend.

3rd Sunday 5pm Contemporary - 5 people, with the service being suspended last winter.

The Contemporary service at Bungwahl has been poorly supported over the past year, with the Rector and two regular couples being the only attendees. These older couples found it difficult to get to church in the dark in winter, and so the joint decision was made to cancel the service.

Traditional worship services at Bungwahl have remained static (with the exception of special events like Christmas and Easter). Most parishioners also regularly share worship at Forster or Tuncurry when there is no service at Bungwahl.

The viability of services continuing at Bungwahl is currently being thoroughly and prayerfully investigated by Parish Council. A public meeting was held and chaired by Archdeacon Les Forester which has led to a number of submissions to Parish Council to consider. Parish Council has set aside 6 months to address these items and should be completed by April this year.

**Ministry team**

***Priest in Local Mission***

Rev Bill Green continues to be a wonderful asset to our parish, and I am very grateful for his enthusiasm to lead traditional worship and for his pastoral heart for visiting those who are unable to get to church through illness, or some other incapacity. Rev Bill has the responsibility for visiting parishioners on my behalf, and, as Rector, I am always available to visit upon request. Rev Bill’s assistance with funerals is also greatly appreciated. Without his help, it would be very difficult to fill the demand for funeral services, as well as being proactive in the parish.

***Parish Administrative Assistant***

In November last year, after considerable prayerfulness, Parish Council made the difficult, but necessary, decision to end the position of Administrative Assistant, in order to focus on raising the funds necessary to employ an assistant Minister in the future. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Belinda Clancy for her work and commitment over the previous three years, which was especially evident when she helped the Parish to continue to function well during the Locum period. On behalf of the Parish, we pray that God will bless Belinda with a new job where her public relations abilities can shine. The Parish office is currently being ably manned in a voluntary capacity by two of our wardens (Judy Hall and Clive Davies).

***Licensed Lay Ministry***

Being a Licensed Lay Assistant [LLA] is a great way to connect meaningfully with parishioners in our church community. Unfortunately, two of our LLAs have recently left the Parish; with Dianne Murphy moving to Newcastle to be closer to family, and Margot (and Ken) Bilston, moving to the Central Coast.

We are blessed however to have Helen Quinn as an LLA, (as well as being in the process of being discerned and trained to become a Priest in Local Mission). Helen will gain experience across all services styles and centres. Our other LLAs are: Dennis Ang (licence to Preach, and focussing on the contemporary services at Nabiac and Dyer’s Crossing); Phillip Castle (licence to preach) and Clive Davies (both focussing on the contemporary service at Forster); and Pat Sanderson (focussing primarily on nursing homes, home communions and Tuncurry church services).

**Regular ministry connections**

***Baptisms***

The 8 baptisms in the Parish over the last year have been an effective way of engaging meaningfully with families (I conducted five of those, and Rev Bill conducted three). The families have often given positive feedback about the enjoyable children’s song and art opportunities.

***Funerals***

The 39 funerals over the past year were one of our most common ways of connecting with the community during their time of great sorrow (I conducted 20 of those, Rev Bill conducted 18, and Margot Bilston conducted 1). This is an increase in funerals of 6 over the previous year. There was also a memorial service held at St. Alban’s for much loved long time parishioner and Lay Minister, Kevin Hepworth.

***Weddings***

The 6 weddings over the past year have been a joyous way of connecting with our community. I conducted 5 of those, and Rev Jeffrey Ware (Sydney) conducted 1. Three weddings were held at Bungwahl, one at Pacific Palms and two at Dyer’s Crossing, which is an increase of 4 weddings over the previous year!

**Engaging meaningfully with the community**

***Connecting with the wider community through the Parish Website and Facebook***

Our Parish Website and Facebook are effective ‘portals’ to visitors, the wider community, and even to the world! Both of these modern means of communication have been updated to make it easier for those outside our church community to see what we have to offer in the Parish. The Website and Facebook are updated regularly with photos of recent events in the life of the Parish, so that the wider community can see that we are actively engaged and contributing to the life of our local community.

***Connecting to younger families through ToddlerTime***

Our ToddlerTime playgroup and our creative Baptism services have established some wonderful connections with young families in our community! Our church now has connections with 20 families in our community through ToddlerTime! Please continue to pray for ToddlerTime and Baptism families to come to have transformed lives through faith in Jesus, and that they would perhaps choose to become regular worshippers in our wonderful church community. Also, please be prayerful that God would bring some younger Christian families into our church to help other families connect with us in a more meaningful way.

***Connecting to the Christian community through Something Special Christian Bookshop***

Due to the vision, planning and hard work of a number of keen parishioners, the Parish Bookshop is up and running again as of August last year. We are blessed to be able to house the bookshop in the Bethany room in St Alban‘s Parish Hall with direct external access (and no rent)! Our bookshop provides great resources to parishioners, and is enabling us to engage meaningfully with Christians from other denominations around Forster/ Tuncurry, and with others in our community. Please pray for the bookshop as more volunteers are needed for it to continue to function effectively (a Working with Children Check is required, and Safe Church Training is beneficial, but not compulsory).

***Connecting with the local community through the Op-Shop***

Our Op-shop has for many years maintained (and continues to maintain) great connections with members of our community. Our wonderful group of volunteers present the loving face of Jesus to all who venture into the shop. The income from the Op-Shop has been steadily growing over the last few years, and is a valuable help to the Parish. Sadly, some of our volunteers are nearing ‘retirement’, and so there is a need for more volunteers so we can keep engaging so well with our local community. If you would be able to volunteer for half a day in the Op-shop, please see Heather Dwyer or Janet Lawrence (a Working with Children Check is required, and Safe Church Training is beneficial but not compulsory).

***Connecting meaningfully with school students - SRE***

Trisha and I, as well as Dennis and Jenny Ang, taught SRE last year. Trisha and I made some wonderful connections with students and teachers through SRE classes at Forster and Tuncurry Public schools, and Dennis and Jenny likewise at Krambach Public School. We often received positive feedback from class teachers and students about the lessons. Presently, there is some concern out in the broader community about some of the content of some SRE lessons, and there is the possibility that in the not-to-distant future that SRE will become a less effective way to engage with school students and to share our faith in Jesus.

With this in mind, and due to my desire to focus my ministry so that our church community can continue to grow more effectively, both in our own faith in Jesus and in our ability to engage in a more relevant way with our community, Trisha and I will not be involved in teaching SRE this year. Dennis and Jenny will continue to teach SRE at Krambach.

If you are interested in teaching or helping with SRE, please let me know. Please continue to pray for the Scripture teachers, students, and their teachers that they may come to have transformed lives through the good news of Jesus.

We are also blessed to be a part of the Scripture in Forster Tuncurry [SIFT] committee that was formed to source and pay for a SRE teacher in the Forster Tuncurry high schools. Dennis Ang is my representative, and is the Chair of the committee, bringing his vast experience as High School Principal and Area Supervisor to the role. SIFT has appointed Jose Vergara as the high school SRE teacher. Please pray for Jose to be able to engage with the students, teachers, and para-professionals, in a way that is relevant and meaningful so that he can inspire transformed lives through faith in Jesus.

***Connecting with each other through growth groups***

There are a number of growth groups that meet across our parish where people are able to connect for friendship, bible study, and prayer. Some of our groups have grown significantly throughout last year as connections deepen between people within the Parish. All our growth groups play a vital role in strengthening our lives through faith in Jesus, as we discuss how God has been working in each other’s lives, as we pray for, and with, one another, and as we “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6.2).

If you don’t have a regular group to meet with, let me encourage you to connect with others in our church community by going along to one of our existing growth groups, or by starting a new group if you like! As we connect more meaningfully with each other, and with God, we will be empowered through His Spirit to better engage with our local community.

**Hopes for the future**

We need to: raise the necessary finances to employ a number of people to engage with younger families in the parish; and free up resources to be creative in encouraging younger retirees who have moved into the area to come and worship with us. Please be prayerful for Parish Council as we discuss these issues in the year ahead.

**Thank you!**

I would like to take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to the parish team; in particular to Rev Bill, the LLA’s, wardens and parish councillors who have all done such a wonderful job throughout the year. Much positive work has been achieved and it has been a pleasure to work alongside you all! Also, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the many parishioners who, voluntarily, work tirelessly for God, using the amazing abilities he has given them to inspire hope in others through faith in God.

**Inspiring hope for the future!**

There is great potential for a bright future for us as a Church community as we grow in love and Christian maturity, and also for those in our community as we connect with them and share God’s wonderful message of hope and salvation through Jesus.

Yours in Christ Jesus,

Rev Mark Harris **BD** (MCD), **BTh** (SMBC), **Thc** (MTC), **BE** (Hons. Newcastle)

**Rector**

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