**Rector’s Annual Report March 2018**

**Connecting us and God**

We have truly been doubly blessed, firstly with the wonderful Gospel that gives our lives meaning and purpose in the ‘here and now’ as well as the sure hope of eternal life, and secondly with the environment in which we live. What a wonderful privilege it is to serve God in this most beautiful part of the world! We have a great climate, fantastic beaches, waterways, and farmland in the 1000 square kilometres or so that is our Parish. But more important are the parishioners who gather each week in our 4 centres across the Parish, where we can demonstrate to the community the love of God in action.

As I write this, an offer has been accepted for the Church building known as St James Bungwahl – our fifth centre - which unfortunately we have had to sell due to a combination of low attendance and high anticipated upkeep costs. We are very grateful that most parishioners who attended St James now worship regularly in our other centres.

At the recent clergy retreat it was made very clear that the Diocese would need to raise Millions of Dollars to provide some compensation for victims of Sexual abuse in the Diocese, as well as examine the viability of assets across the Diocese. This money can only come from the sale of church property such as church buildings with few in attendance that are located close to sister churches. Parishes also need to look at other models of ministry, to utilise our assets better. Having a church building that is only open 2 hours per week, is poor utilisation of the asset. Perhaps the building can be used for something else during the week. A diocesan team will be visiting each parish to assess the assets in the parishes and make recommendations to the Diocese. This may be seen by some as a bad thing, however this action may also drive us to think of fresh ways we can ‘be church’ and interact constructively with our communities.

My vision for our Parish continues to be that *“We will connect meaningfully with our community to inspire hope and transform lives through faith in Jesus”.*  Jesus came to seek and save the lost, and that’s what we do too through our many and varied activities such as: court care; baptism services; the Dyer’s Crossing guild; our friendship group; our growth groups; men’s dinners; mini-lunch; our monthly St Alban’s BBQ; our Op-Shop; Rugrats; our Christian Bookshop; ToddlerTime; and our walking group (See individual reports for more details).

My dual focus in the year ahead is to look at our assets and their utilisation, and to raise the profile of our care for people of all ages. It is vital that when people move into our area to work or retire, they know that we will support them. We need to raise the profile of our growth groups to nurture people in the faith, and our Pastoral Partners program to support people through practical means. Not all churches are as committed to pastoral care as we are, and we need to excel in this important area. Visitation will continue in the nursing homes with services which are either Anglican or interdenominational as a member of the Ministers Fellowship (of which I have been recently appointed the Chair). Home visitation to those who are unable to ‘get out’ will also continue by request. Visiting the elderly is especially important in a retirement area such as ours, since many people move here in early retirement, and have no immediate relatives in the area. How sad would it be, to be a faithful Christian attending church until your twilight years, only to find yourself with no Christian input, and no fellowship when you can no longer attend church? As part of the body of Christ in this area, we have an obligation to people of all ages - to pastorally care for all who have come to faith and to promote the gospel to those who do not yet have a relationship with Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

We need to continue to work on effectively caring for people of all ages. Our aim to employ a families’ minister has not yet come to fruition. Hopefully God will provide such as person, or persons, who are suitably trained and willing to join us with the intention of connecting into the younger community with the Gospel. The days of opening the church doors and expecting that people will come are long gone. People come to faith in Jesus mostly through significant relationships with Christian people. I still believe that 3 lay ministers (with families) employed part time would be ideal as they could be a support to each other as well as help build the core of our contemporary service at Forster 9.30am. Finding 3 lay ministers who have the skills to find work in the area as well as be employed by the church is difficult, although not impossible. More likely is one minister (and family) employed full time. Please remain prayerful as our need is significant for the growth of our church.

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 desires people to know Him, the greater will be our motivation/passion to share our faith with others.

**Meaningful services for diverse people**

Our Parish now provides services for a wider range of people in our community since we introduced contemporary services as well our traditional services in Forster, Nabiac and Dyers Crossing. The introduction of contemporary services has been well received by many people.

The aim of the contemporary services is of course to provide a relaxed, less formal, and family-friendly way to worship God. Vestments are not worn, contemporary Christian songs are sung, and responsive liturgy is kept at a minimum. Essential elements of what it is to be an Anglican Christian are included, such as a confession and declaration of forgiveness, a creed (regularly but not every Sunday) and the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Supper is held once a month.

As can be seen from the graph above, the decline in Total attendance has ‘levelled off’ significantly over the past 3 years. It has been very pleasing to welcome 3 young children and their Mums/Grandmas regularly to our 9.30am service at Forster, through contact being made at our ToddlerTime playgroup. It is also very pleasing to welcome a number of retirees who have moved into the area. Please continue to pray that our new more diverse structure will see growth in attendance across the Parish.

**Ministry team**

***Priest in Local Mission***

Rev Bill Green has been a wonderful asset to our parish, and I have gratefully appreciated 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. Unfortunately for us, Rev Bill has had to retire on the advice from his doctor. We wish Rev Bill and Jill all God’s blessings in this next phase of their lives.

God has truly blessed us by proving Rev Helen Quinn as the newest member of our ministry team. Rev Helen’s primary focus is as chaplain to the Indigenous community and she has been well received as an Elder in the community. Helen has started a new group on Monday morning at St Nicholas Tuncurry called *Culture and Christ*, and some of our Indigenous community are attending and enjoying the interaction. We wish Rev Helen great success as she shares the love of Christ with our local Indigenous community.

Rev Helen is also conducting many of the traditional services on my behalf at Tuncurry, Nabiac and Dyers Crossing, and occasionally at Forster. This is somewhat more than was originally planned, but since the retirement of Rev Bill, Rev Helen has stepped into the breach admirably. Please continue to uphold Rev Helen in your prayers as she is also in her 2nd year of intensive formation and has many trips to Newcastle with her obligations to the Diocese.

With Rev Bill now retired, and Rev Helen’s obligations, the responsibility for visiting parishioners falls primarily on me. Time constraints don’t allow me the freedom of just turning up uninvited for a visit, however I am always available to visit upon request. Please feel free to ask for a visit!

***Parish Administration***

Clive Davies and Judy Hall have staffed the Parish Office admirably over the past year. That said, I’m sure that they would be more than happy if there was another willing volunteer to be in the office on a regular basis. Please see me if you feel that this is an area you could serve in.

***Licensed Lay Ministry***

Our 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). My second eldest son, Caleb who is a student completing his Master of Divinity studies at Sydney Missionary and Bible College has also been approved by Bishop Greg (last year) as a LLA with license to preach. Caleb is hoping to come up from Sydney approximately once a month to preach or lead services as part of his experience and formation.

**Regular Church connections**

***Baptisms, Weddings, and Funerals***

There were 2 baptisms in the Parish over the last year (compared to 8 in the previous year). There are a number of factors contributing to this downturn, including; community responses to the Royal Commission and ensuing media coverage. The 33 funerals (6 less than the previous year) and 2 memorial services over the past year were one of our most common ways of connecting with our community during their time of great sorrow (I conducted 22 funerals and 2 memorial services, Rev Bill conducted 7, and Rev Helen conducted 4). I conducted the 2 (down from 6) weddings that took place in the Parish over the past year. One wedding was held at St James Bungwahl, and the other at Boomerang Beach. They have been a small but joyous way of connecting with our community!

**Engaging meaningfully with our community**

***Connecting through the Parish Website and Facebook page***

Our Parish Website and Facebook are effective ‘portals’ to visitors, our 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 our Parish has to offer! The Website and Facebook page are updated regularly with photos of recent events in the life of our Parish, so that the wider community can see that we are actively engaged and contributing to the life of our local community.

***Connecting through ToddlerTime, our Op Shop and our Bookshop***

Our ToddlerTime playgroup and our creative Baptism services have established some wonderful connections with young families! Our church now connects with 25 families in our community! We thank our Gracious God for bringing some new families from ToddlerTime along to worship with us in our wonderful church community. Please continue to pray that God would bring more families along to our church. Also, our Op Shop has continued to maintain great connections with members of our community. Unfortunately, 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). Furthermore, our amazing Christian Bookshop continues to provide great resources to parishioners, and is enabling us to engage meaningfully with Christians from other denominations around Forster/ Tuncurry, as well as with our ToddlerTime community, and beyond. Please see individual reports for further information about these wonderful ministries.

***Connecting through SRE***

Dennis and Jenny Ang have continued to enjoy teaching SRE throughout the year at Krambach Public School. If you are interested in teaching or helping with SRE, please let me know. Please continue to pray for all Scripture teachers, students, and classroom teachers that they may come to have transformed lives through the good news of Jesus. Also, we are blessed to be a part of the Scripture in Forster Tuncurry [SIFT] committee that was formed to source and employ a High School SRE teacher in Forster Tuncurry. As my representative, and as Chair of the committee, Dennis Ang continues to support Jose Vergara in his role as the SIFT High School SRE facilitator. Please pray for all those involved in SRE in schools that they would continue to engage in a relevant way in 21st Century schools.

***Growth Group Connections and Pastoral Partners***

There are a number of growth groups that meet across our Parish where people enjoy connecting through friendship, Bible study, and prayer. Some of our groups have grown significantly throughout last year as connections deepen between people within our 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 our lives, as we “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6.2), and as we pray for, and with, one another. I encourage all members of our church community to meet with others through going along to one of our existing growth groups, or by starting a new group if you like! Trisha and I will be starting a new Growth group starting on Wednesday 7th March at 4pm in the Church hall. All welcome! Also, our Pastoral Partners programme is being reignited this year as a vital way in which we can all grow together! Heather Webster will be facilitating this programme commencing in the beginning of May. As we connect more with each other, and with God, we will be empowered to engage even more effectively with our local community.

**Thank you**

I would like to take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to our Parish team; in particular to Rev Bill and Rev Helen, our 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 our many parishioners who, voluntarily, work tirelessly for God, using their amazing God-given abilities to inspire hope in others through faith in Jesus.

**Inspiring hope for the future!**

There is great potential for a bright future for us as a Church community! We have some great things to focus on: as we endeavour to raise the necessary finances to employ a person, or number of people, to engage with younger families in our Parish; as we focus on welcoming new retirees to the area; and as we focus on ways of connecting with and supporting each other more effectively. Please pray for your representatives on Parish Council as we collaborate on these issues in the year ahead, and as we all grow closer to each other and to our amazing God!

Yours in Christ Jesus,

Rev Mark Harris

**BD** (MCD), **BTh** (SMBC), **ThC** (MTC), **BE** (Hons. Newcastle)

**Rector**