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Dear friends,

It was wonderful to see so many people in the two churches at Christmas. Christmas Eve saw combined congregations of over 800 and if you add together all those who came to special services the figure topped 1,000. When you think of the size of our communities, together with the fact that people will have attended the other village churches as well, this is an amazing statistic. I shook the hands of everyone who attended the service. I am sure that by 12.30 p.m. on Christmas Day every germ in Ingatestone had been on my right hand! Shaking everyone's hand and wishing them personally a "Merry Christmas" was a great joy. It also surprised me with the age profile of those who were attending the services. There were many people in their 30s and 40s, together with young children. I felt that something was happening about establishing traditions of including in celebrating Christmas going to church. In fact many people commented that with the church service their Christmas had begun. I am delighted that for many people you simply cannot celebrate Christmas without coming to church.

Our two crib services were a particular delight. Sue took the service at Fryerning where 70 people attended, including many with very young children. The service included the playing of a flute and a harp by Pippa and Isla, two local girls. The service at Ingatestone started over ten minutes late as we were determined to get everyone in who wanted to be there. A parent from the Church School had told me she was telling everyone to get to the service half an hour early in order to get a seat. This was good advice. Someone was heard to say, "I have been going to church for over fifty years and I have never seen a church full like this". The huge attendance gave a very significant message of the relevance of church to the children present. In a world of uncertainties and rapidly changing values, this is very important.

The crib service at Ingatestone has also always included the bringing in of wrapped presents to be placed under the tree. When we reach that part of the service I am especially blessed to be standing in the pulpit and watching everyone walking around the church to look at the crib and then place their presents under the tree. The generosity of those taking part was much appreciated. A group of us undid the presents two days later and it was evident that everyone had bought new items particularly for the service. It would be impossible to get the gifts to the Catholic Children's Society, based in Rayleigh, for Christmas Day. So they take the presents to use as birthday gifts throughout the year. It is a very important lesson for our local children to be involved with choosing and wrapping a gift to then give away to an unknown recipient. Jesus himself said it is better to give than receive. In our consumer driven world where for many the most important part of life is 'the shopping experience' this activity is very important.

We have a quiet but clear emphasis on the importance of giving in this way. The shoeboxes for operation Christmas Child, the gifts for Harvest for the Hungry, the Christingle collection for the Children's Society, the Crisis collection, the EMUs sponsoring a child, the Church School's yearly choice of a charity, and the list goes on and on. We all need to look beyond ourselves and to the needs of others. This is fundamental to the message of Christianity. Jesus talked about the need for treasure in heaven rather than on earth. As Christians we believe our resources are placed in trust with us. We use them how we choose, that is our basic free will. We are encouraged to be hedonist by our society and only think of our own needs and satisfactions. Our churches should always be places that exist, amongst numerous other reasons, to help us look beyond ourselves. It was very moving that on Christmas morning at Fryerning Sue passed round the picture of the slums in Kibera in Kenya. In the midst of our plenty we need to remember the reality for others. That is a message not just for Christmas, but for the whole year. As we approach Lent let us hold that thought and move into action.

Yours in Christ, *Patrick*