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My brothers and sisters in Christ,

The extended period of Margaret's computer difficulties has emphasised two realities.

As churches we need to use our gifts collectively for our benefit and that of the wider community. This, of course, is basic stewardship teaching. God gives us everything, our gifts and talents, for the use of Him and others. We used to have three people involved in the collation of the magazine. Now we are down to just one, and we have seen the difficulties that can occur. We need others with IT skills to be able to assist. This is an urgent request.

We have also seen the significance of the magazine to a community beyond that of regular church members. The development of church magazines around the country occurred during the Victorian era, a time of confidence and belief in the role of the church in the community. That is true of here as well. Many churches no longer produce magazines. The confidence is gone, together with those willing to use their gifts and give their time. We have websites that are widely admired and always up to date. Yet the 500+ regular subscribers to this magazine would not all be able to access this medium, though we have had thousands of hits since we launched the websites. I believe there is still a role for the magazine in providing information about the churches. It would be a sad day if we followed the trend and it had to fold.

I had lunch on November the 14th in the Garden Centre. I gave the cashier the money covering two meals, and it dropped into the gratuities basket. As she took it out, I commented, "that would have been rather generous". "Well that is all right, we would not have minded, it is Christmas," was her reply. She was rather startled when I replied, "Well it certainly is not, not yet!"

At the Bible reading group, which you could join if you wanted, one of the members was rather surprised that both Sue and I said that England is now considered a Post Christian country. By this is meant that many of the traditions and practices associated with Christianity still hang on, but the faith that underpinned them and gave real meaning has diminished, almost to the point of non-existence. Just look at the Christmas displays in shops. Apparently the must have item for this year is a black Christmas tree, topped with a black fairy. I wonder if you saw Priest Idol on Channel 4? Here, a once prosperous mining village on the edge of Barnsley now had just one church left. Apart from the C. of E. all the other denominations had left. If it was not for the Family Purse system, so would have the Anglicans. The congregation was only just in double figures. After a three year interregnum there was only one applicant, a young American assistant Priest. Channel 4 hired a top advertising firm to come up with ideas to help, but they were almost despairing as to what to do. If ever a programme showed the reality of Post Christian England, it was this one.

At least here we can be sure that every child educated in the village will have been in the churches for major festivals. At the Junior school we have introduced into the R.E. visits to the other village churches. My weekly assembly at the Junior School is now supplemented by visits to the Infants School. The continued increase of attendance on Remembrance Sunday, with wide support from the uniformed organizations, shows how we are attempting to hold back the tide. But increasingly funeral directors tell me that families want cremations with no religious content. I took a large funeral at the crematorium recently, very well attended with local people. As I walked around looking at the flowers I heard a young couple talking. "Well that was not as bad as I expected." "Apart from all that religious stuff." "Oh well that's all rubbish." As I write, weddings booking are down for next year in the churches.

I hope your decorations for Christmas reflect the reason that we celebrate something that is much more than a winter festival. And I pray your schedule has room for celebrating in church. Amen. *Patrick*