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Dear friends,

The service for New Year's Eve at 6 o'clock is called 'A service of Hope'. It is a time for looking back on the past year and also a time for looking forward. We all do this as the old year turns to the new. For many of us 2005 will be remembered with mixed emotions. As we get older, people say that the years pass more quickly. Yet I feel that if momentous events take place, they appear to fill a lot of time, to stretch time. As you are aware, my mother died on 25th of September. Already this feels like a long time ago. Others of you have also had major life changing events that mean that Christmas 2005 was different from any previous Christmas. At the service we remember those who have gone from being with us. But we also remember those who have been baptised. I am delighted to say that this number continues to be very significant. We also give thanks for those who have had their weddings in the churches. Both baptism and wedding services are obviously joyous occasions and are full of hope for the future. For the Christian, a service giving thanks for the life of someone is also a positive expression of hope. Only recently, after having attended another memorial service that contained no religious content, a member of the congregation commented to me, "it was so different from your Mum's service. That was full of joy and hope". Perhaps the saddest thing said to me this year was an elderly man after the death of his wife, whose service I was to undertake. He said to me, "I wish I had your faith. I do not believe I will ever see her again". Without hope, what do we have?

During November and December there have been a great many programmes on the television about religion. It is as if the media have woken up to the fact that religion is of great interest to many people. Priest Idol followed the efforts of the Church of England to revive a parish in a village near Barnsley. With the aid of lots of money from Channel 4 for some very modern advertising, and some very radical changes to the church and changes to the services, a miracle appeared to have taken place

A church that could only attract less than ten people every Sunday was now attracting over fifty people. As an elderly church member said, "what is the point of us having the best message in the world if the way we deliver it means hardly no-one comes?" It is food for thought and in the last four and a half years we have made changes at our churches, and the process is on-going. We offer a variety of service styles across the churches, with none seen as superior, just different ways of worshipping God.

Perhaps the most significant point about Priest Idol was that before the changes, the Church of England was still in the village, a community around the size of Ingatestone. All the other denominations had left, seeing the ministry as not viable. It was the family purse system that meant the Church of England was still there. It is this system that keeps the Church in place locally and nationally. Both our churches pay over £20,000 per year to the Diocese of Chelmsford, Ingatestone paying more than Fryerning. The exact figures are easily available. We need to have a view of our church as beyond simply the church we attend. In both our churches we are looking to make considerable changes, changes we will have to fund ourselves. But as we do this, we cannot forget our wider responsibilities. The same is true of the Church School. Here work will be needed in 2006 and the churches locally have to contribute towards these needed improvements.

The BBC covered the enthronement of Arch Bishop John Santamu as Arch Bishop of York. I have the service in tape if anyone would like to borrow it. The mixture of old and new, solemnity and joy, was wonderful. Arch Bishop John, quoting David Watson from a quarter of a century ago, said of the English, "we have become consumers of religion rather than disciples of Jesus." He went on to say that if the church was full of disciples of Jesus, it would explode with life and vitality. People outside the church would look at those inside and say, "look at these people! I want what they have! I want to be part of that!" For if we are truly disciples of Jesus then we look at the world and at life in a very different way. We have hope!

Yours in Christ, *Patrick.*