

## HEALTHY CHURCHES – WHO IS MISSING?

At the AGM of the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (WWT) on 20 June, which a number from around the Diocese attended, there were three memorable presentations,

- The remarkable presence of European Bison in woods north-east of Canterbury – “bison, as ‘ecosystem engineers’, can restore the natural biodiversity of a landscape” (Kent Wildlife Trust) by grazing, dust bathing, eating bark, even felling trees – where they co-exist with Exmoor ponies and Iron-Age pigs, who themselves bring other benefits
- The reintroduction of beavers in Derbyshire – after 800 years beavers are back in Derbyshire! .... ‘they enjoy over 40 acres of wetland habitat, within a special beaver-proof fence’. They create diverse wetland areas suited to otters, water voles and water shrews.



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It was the final presentation, though, that caught my attention, not least because I am preaching at churches in Offchurch and Ryton this summer season, due to new clergy ‘vacancies.’ A project, long planned – the connection of adjacent woodland at Ryton, Wappenbury, and Bubbenhall, within the Dunsmore Living Landscapes Scheme – enabled boxes to be placed in trees, and in 2017/2018 for more than 70 dormice to be released there.

The Hazel Dormice is the only species of dormouse native to Britain, and are understandably a protected species. By 1999 there were only six known populations in Warwickshire. The presence of good fruiting hazel was essential; the signs, five year on, are that the dormice are thriving.

Engagement by churches with biodiversity schemes in churchyards can be inspiring to local communities; supporting our local Wildlife Trust can also be rewarding, too. Coming into contact with WWT professionals and volunteers working ‘for and with nature’ - very often alongside sympathetic farmers and landowners - has also opened my eyes to the parallels with healthy church development. What can we learn from their practices and passion?

Might we, too, engage in projects and wider culture changes to ensure that individuals and families are valued for who they are; welcomed with great care and respect? The WWT team’s understanding the annual feeding cycle and other complexities of the lives of dormice, showed me how superficial our own efforts can be at ‘welcoming the stranger to church communities’, and more challengingly, how our own preferences may have effectively excluded them for such a long time. So we might ask, “what is now essential for them to flourish?” Good coffee? Authentic friendship groups? Services tailored to their cultural preferences? Support with the basics of life? Language? .... and much more. Who do we want to ‘return’? How might this unfold? As we see with bison, beavers and dormice, we could start by valuing their distinct contribution and qualities within our churches and local communities. How might their presence change and refresh the church? Who is missing? What longer term plans are needed to prepare the way for newcomers?

Rev Clive Hicks

**Healthy Churches Development Enabler**