



s a boost

More than 30 people have been trained so far as lay leaders as part of an ongoing project to support rural parishes backed by Church of England national funding.

The 'Benefice of the Future' - now the Growing Rural Parishes programme in the Diocese of Winchester, includes 13 multi-parish rural benefices.

The programme began work with three multi parish benefices - made up of up to 22 churches in total – offering them the chance to choose how they'd like to modernise and grow.

The project has provided features such as improved broadband connection and portable WiFi along with updated websites and branding, contact less giving and centralised administrative services to the churches.

Jon Whale, Project Officer, said that as a result, churches were freed to do more mission work and set up more church services while also experimenting with new means of evangelisation and outreach. He said that so far 30 new lay leaders have been trained as part of the project.

In one case a church hosted a 'pop-up' pub at weekends while a village pub was temporarily closed.

The North Hampshire Downs benefice, made up of 12 parishes over 12 villages, was among the first group to take part. It has set up pooled administrative support for all the benefice, paid for a youth and children's pastor and invested in a communications plan across the parishes.

Rector Simon Butler said there was a growing sense of shared mission and ministry across the benefice as a result of the investment. "Through our centralised administrative support we have been able to take off so much of the administrative burden from clergy and our key lay volunteers which then allowed us to re-focus our time in pastoral leadership in different communities," he said.

The Benefice of the Future project began in 2017 with Strategic Development Funding support, focusing on three multi parish benefices. A further four joined the project last year with another three joining in the period up to 2025. The project is now being funded through the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board.

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