This report is based on my experiences of ministry from arrival in the benefice in June 2020 up to and including today.

The year’s ministry and worship has been shaped largely by the ongoing COVID pandemic, which has caused seasons of its own – those of being in full lockdown, and various degrees of partial measures. Today was the first time our congregation has been able to sing in a Sunday worship service in Church in over a year. We praise God for his faithfulness to our community in the time, realising that we have had very low numbers of parishioners who have been unwell with COVID. And yet no one has been unaffected by its impact. As such in March 2021 we carried out an online service of remembering, to mark the first anniversary of the first lockdown, to gather with and remember all those who had lost loved ones during the time.

The pandemic has demanded new levels of creativity, responsiveness and resilience. It has brought to the fore some of our strengths and also highlighted areas of our ministry that would benefit from renewed prayer and focus.

One of the first things initiated in March 2020 was the provision of Daily Reflections by email. Today there are regularly over 90 readers of the reflections, indicating deeper engagement with the word on a daily basis.

Faith has also been seen to flourish through the midweek theology/study groups that have been taken place frequently on Wednesday evenings, through the successful Alpha Group that began meeting in late September 2020 and still meets for walks, tea and cake (thank you Pauline!).

Both of these examples were possible only due to the ministry team quickly adapting to ministering across a digital platform – zoom, for the very first time. This has been a steep learning curve with lots of challenges but has also enabled some people to continue to meet socially (albeit virtually) when many would otherwise have been deeply isolated, to continue to grow in discipleship and to keep church operations ticking over. Families with children did not benefit from the move of Sunday worship to zoom. But this is where we have dug in and tried to reach out in new ways.

For example, through zoom we were able to not just continue our schools ministry - with weekly collective worships and OTB stories – but indeed *grow* our witness: stories from the bible were being spoken into the homes of our Brimscombe school pupils and their families for the very first time. Praise God!

This encouraged us to do a zoom Christingle service, and we were also able to host a zoom carols service at Christmas. Also, thanks to the inspired idea from church members Joyce and Philip Eliot as well as Helen Kerr, we also gifted every pupil at Brimscombe with a book each at Christmas to bring the nativity to life in a fresh and vibrant way.  
We were also able to continue to meet with our lasers youth group monthly over zoom, and then in March 2021 we launched a second youth group, Rooted, which looks to have fun while digging more purposefully into the word, and also meets monthly.

As a PCC we are delighted to have had a new addition to our team – Leah – and are also hugely grateful for all the commitment and sacrifice of its other existing members. Our churchwardens have had to work particularly hard to keep our buildings safe and in good order – and we give thanks, too, to the team of volunteer cleaners they rustled up from nowhere to keep the buildings sanitised and open where possible throughout the year. The church is entering a new season as restrictions are lifted, which will continue to demand more than ever that we reflect on our culture of ministry.

We cannot help note that I’m offering this report rather than Peter Francis, who is currently off sick, and moving forward we need to look to find ways in which we can love and serve him as he loves and serves us, thereby enabling his ministry to flourish. On a personal note, I would like to thank you all for welcoming me so fully into your community and church, for patiently guiding and encouraging me. Thanks particularly to Peter Gee and Victoria Robson, who have been so gracious and supportive, and to our outstanding churchwardens Chris and Pauline, and to Helen Kerr – I am completely in awe of you all!

But I pray that as a church, going forward we will commit more fully to our Diocese’s vision for our ministry to be one of discipleship: based on each individual becoming a more committed and confident follower and witness of Jesus. Of this ministry being shared amongst *all* baptised members within our Church. Of it being healthy – ministry that is sustainable and allows each person to flourish, and ministry that is engaged – that enables the engagement of the church with the local and wider community.

Indeed it would be absurd to do a ministry report without talking about our wider community that we seek to serve and witness to. The port at Brimscombe is changing. The Grace Network has relocated, The Ship Inn closed and now has recently changed owners and re-opened. Felt Café has delicious cake and a loyal fanbase! The skatepark is desperately searching new premises and facing eviction very soon. The Methodist Church will have its final service before closing its doors next Sunday, too. And there is much much going on besides AND there is development on its way. We need to collectively seek the Lord on all these things in prayer, and discern how and where he may be leading us to serve him.

In practice all of this will mean having the courage to try new things and not always succeeding, but hoping to have grace and to learn from our experiences. It will also mean that we may need to lay down some practices that have become established tradition, recognising that pruning is required for new growth.

I pray for a summer of rest, of rebuilding relationships, of establishing more robust foundations that will help us meet the challenges of the year to come, and for the Holy Spirit to come in power to equip and inspire us to join in more fully with God’s kingdom work in our neighbourhood and beyond. Amen.

Rev Sarah Haslam,   
Assistant Curate to the Benefice of Brimscombe, Woodchester and Rodborough.