

Rector's Reflection – March 2021

What a difference a year makes.

Our Annual Church meeting last year was originally scheduled for the night that lockdown officially started. The previous week, schools had been shut, then church buildings... Of course we then cancelled the ACM (eventually held on Zoom in October), and no doubt many of us found ourselves wondering: what would the future of our church community be?

To answer that question: last week I was asked to fill in a survey regarding local church life, asking what we were now doing online. This was the response I submitted for St Mary's:

'We have migrated everything online, and are doing almost as much as we were with buildings open – only our midweek coffee mornings have suffered. In detail:

- Weekly Sunday worship, pre-recorded and link posted to website, social media and via church email circulation list every Saturday evening
- Other pre-recorded online services for special festivals and occasions - VE Day, Act of Remembrance, Ascension, Easter weekend and Christmas etc
- Daily Inspirations – brand new thought for the day written specially, available church website Monday to Saturday
- Crafty Church for Kids – pre-recorded fortnightly online, available to congregations and wider community
- Weekly youth and children's groups: Youth Group 14+, Rock Solid 9-14s, Zoom Kids (5-8s) all run across the LEP
- Sunday coffee on Zoom
- Monthly quiz night on Zoom
- Midweek home groups on Zoom, including extra groups for Lent
- Weekly school coffee morning on Zoom
- Prayer Online – dedicated prayer page on church website, and occasional Zoom prayer meeting
- Email Prayer Chain for urgent requests – info shared confidentially via email
- Good news stories – occasional, posted on church website
- We're fortunate that very few of our members aren't online - even most of our older ones have internet access. However, all those that aren't online get a paper copy of the service, talk, and sometimes the previous week's daily inspirations through their door every Saturday.'

To which we can add the Pastoral Phone Calling Team, which has faithfully contacted people throughout the pandemic, as well as the large number of informal phone calls, doorstep visits, greetings sent and covid-secure walks together, through which the strength of our relational bonds during this season I believe has actually grown.

Ditto, online schools work – pre-recorded Harvest, Remembrance and Christmas assemblies were all enthusiastically received by 5 local primary schools reaching over 2,000 children.

We can even note that ourselves and All Saints Milton Keynes Village were pretty much the only churches in MK to be open every Sunday we were legally allowed to be between July and Christmas last year...

In other words, what we're offering now is barely less in overall terms than when we were doing everything face-to-face with no restrictions! In some cases – e.g. youth work and Daily Inspirations – it is actually *more*.

This has been a tremendously challenging season – there has been so much loss, and pain, and most of us experience mood swings on a daily basis. Sure I'm not alone in that! But there is also so much to give thanks for. We've not only survived the last year, we've thrived (as best we can), and find ourselves with significant opportunities and a whole new ministry format that we'd hardly even considered pre-pandemic.

So where are we heading this year?

The short answer is that it's almost impossible to give a firm answer to this. However I will give a brief summary relating to four key questions or areas:

When to re-open – the biggest challenge with this is the fact that restrictions on what we can do remain very firmly in place, with no indication as to when these will be lifted. For all that our Simple Sunday Service was a great blessing to the small community who supported it – and we were only too glad to serve in this way – when it's not possible to sing, or to take communion satisfactorily, or to serve refreshments, or to share the peace/have physical contact in any way, and when every contact has to be done at a distance with masks on, what we can offer is very much diminished as an experience of 'church'.

What we have learnt over 5 months of limited re-opening last year is that most of the congregation don't want to attend under those restrictions, preferring to worship online and wait until restrictions are eased. If this could be months away, do we re-start soon, but risk cementing the do/don't divide, and lose the possibility of re-starting with a bang later in the year? On the other hand, is it better to open anyway for a small group happy to be in the building despite the limitations?

Grief and gathering – as restrictions ease we will need to offer two particularly important 'outlets' – for grief, and for gathering. I will likely have to hold a number of memorial services for those whose funerals took place last year in painfully constrained circumstances. There may be other ways we can mark grief, too, including the wonderful *gentlespaces* initiative. Amidst the hopeful headlines of vaccination we must not forget to grieve properly what and especially who has been lost over this last year.

Similarly, just being able to gather – especially outdoors, perhaps, while restrictions indoors remain – could be a vitally important part of our 'reconnecting together'. It may even be that the social side of church life takes priority in terms of what we organise in person first – safe in the knowledge, of course, that online worship remains a bedrock whatever happens.

Capitalising on the opportunities brought about by online church – our worshipping community online is, we believe, significantly larger than the number that attended in person on any given Sunday. How do we form meaningful connections with this group, many of whom are unknown to us? We need to be looking at engagement, not attendance, as the key determinant in how we analyse the quality of our church life. This was probably always true, but never more so than now.

Becoming and being a hybrid church. Online worship and other ministry is here to stay. That is one firm decision I've made. There are just too many positives and benefits to consider stopping it. We have a great team delivering it, and I want to pay particular tribute to Philip, Jacob, Alise, Amelie, Rosie, Barny, Clare and Lianne for their wonderful efforts – and to the many, many others of you who have recorded prayers, readings and responses, or who have sent me pictures. On any given Sunday, more people are contributing to a particular service than did even in church, which is something we never expected, but we certainly celebrate.

As in-person community becomes first possible and then frequent, how we adjust to this hybrid model will be critically important. I continue to see us as being *one community with two access points, with a common mission and a common commitment to each other*. The two streams also feed off each other – people who attend in person on Sunday may well choose to join a Zoom group midweek, and vice-versa.

As an aside, I plan to continue to record the online service, rather than stream what goes on in church. The reason is this: if the primary purpose of Sunday is to worship God (meeting each other is vital, but secondary), then what we offer should always be guided by that as first priority – the online format we currently have is far better than streaming a service which is twice as long and which will feel far flatter on a screen than it will for those gathered.

It may be more work to keep it all going – but as I've seen the marvellous way that we all, as a church community, have pulled together in this extraordinary season, I am confident we can pull it off. **This is who we are. We are family. We are Christ's church, for the sake of His world. And, together, we can do it. Amen!**