

ADDITIONAL REFLECTION FOR 2020

Annual meetings are supposed to review the previous year, but in these exceptional times we need to take this opportunity to reflect together about the last 6 months - the hardest 6 months of my life as a leader (and not without its own personal sadness's for me).

All of us

Every one of us has been impacted personally – all ages, all positions, all stages of life – and the stories we will tell of this year will live long in our memories. For many of us, our lives will never be the same.

But also, every aspect of our shared Church life has been touched. Every part. Every Church activity has had to adapt. Every congregation. Every small group. Every relationship.

Prevented from gathering, so as to keep each other safe, we have had to radically decentralise. And this has been hard. The biggest impact on us all has been on our relationships with each other, our sense of connection, our sense of belonging. Six months in, there is a growing sense of grief and loss about this.

As a Church organisation, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted us massively - our worship, our community life together, our discipleship and our mission.

None of us

None of us could foresee the kind of change that was about to be forced upon us. And, as with all disruptive change, it has been inevitable that we have experienced discomfort, stress, disappointment, and a level of grief. It was like we were all caught up in a blizzard, only to find that this was going to become more like a long winter, or even a mini-ice age.

I found this metaphor helpful in the early days as I tried to get my head around everything as a leader, and I shared it a few times. But while this was helpful in getting my thinking straight it didn't protect me, or any of us, from the reality of it all – the massive social, economic, and emotional impact of it all.

The early days

Our first responses were rightly about safety – about making sure that we loved one another, and our neighbours, by closing our Church services and Church centre and restricting the spread of the virus. This seemed like a hard decision at the time, but with hindsight, it was the clearly right thing to do. Soon, every Church across the nation was closed too.

Quickly after this, even as we all tried to catch our breath, as a central team we focused on four things:

- sustaining community and connection even though in lockdown
- helping each other to worship God from our homes
- resourcing the Church in ways that were aimed at helping us grow as disciples
- experimenting with ways of loving our neighbours in ways that were in line with the restrictions imposed on us

Worship, community, discipleship, and mission are the four foundational components of any church and revisiting these themes was a helpful way forward. Ali, Kate, Nigel and Erin, each in turn, helped us move forward together, taking leadership along with Gen, Charles and Martin connecting in amazing new ways with our children and youth.

I am so proud of the way the whole team energetically tried to re-orientate their work around these core tasks and so grateful for the commitment and effort everyone put in, working longer hours as we learned a new way of working. Overnight, everyone's job description was thrown up into the air and fell down into a new place as we all had to rapidly improvise and adapt. Everything we were doing was taking us so much longer, and decision making was stressful, exacerbated by not meeting face to face, and the constantly changing rules and guidelines. I am so grateful to the Viv, Kate, Nikki and Vineeta for helping us make it all work, and I am grateful to Tim and Lynwen, the Standing Committee and the PCC for the trust and grace that we shared in these difficult days.

Everything was different

Of course, in these early days (and we are still in them) we have been learning a completely new language for worship online, trying to master not just a new technology, but also a new medium. Looking back, by no means perfect, we have done really well. We were certainly all trying our best and I am so grateful to everyone who joined me in risky business of

bringing Church online – trying to create unity across the whole Church, all generations. Thank you, to you all as a Church, for sticking with us as we learned together.

Completely new weekly rhythms

In those early days, as all our personal worlds were dramatically impacted, many (but not all) of us experienced a period of simplification, as our normal obligations came to an abrupt halt. Not travelling to work and not being able to socialise or participate in activities except in very small numbers, cleared our diaries.

As a church, we were delighted to see hundreds of people watch and participate in worship online, and we noted the way that, despite its inadequacies, livestreaming our worship widened the scope and reach of our Church life. We may have been forced to embrace the online world, but now we are here, we know that we have to learn how to make the best of it, for the sake of the Gospel. The world of the younger generations is now all of ours too.

Looking outwards

Right from the beginning of it all, we have been actively trying to work out how best to offer help or support to the poorest and the most vulnerable as a church. Being dispersed and prevented from mixing, we found it hard to make many of our ideas take root.

All of us, however, have been moved to reach out to our neighbours and as individuals we looked for ways to be a blessing to others. These multiple acts of kindness and love, mostly hidden from view, such as the hundreds of meals that have been cooked in people's kitchens and delivered to others' door, have been signs of God's kingdom finding expression in our lives, but it has been hard for us not to have had more central activities for us to unite around. Supporting local foodbanks has been a great way that we have been able to share and respond to pressing need and it is important that we continue in this as we head into winter.

The financial impact

As the scale of the restrictions took hold, we had to make decisions about employment and furlough. These were hard but we had to make sure that

we acted responsibly, not knowing how bad things might be, and wanting to protect the positions and salaries of our paid team. As a Church we can be so grateful for the generosity of all those who have continued to give to the ministry and mission of the Church each month, and for those few who even stepped up their giving to meet the need.

The personal impact

As a clergy team we have also been helping families, individuals and couples through key moments of grief, and joy – Funerals, weddings and births. And I am so grateful for the pastoral care team for their support too in responding to individuals in need.

First there was Easter, then Summer, and now we are in the Autumn, anticipating Winter and then Spring – and every one of us, old or young, has been touched. Our world has been changed. Our emotions rocked. Our faith challenged. Our hope tested.

Living with the virus

As a nation, as a world, we are all in this together. And we are all caught between a rock and a hard place. Everything within us wants this to end. We long to get back to normal, to meet, to work, to get our business or social activities up and running again and to re-activate the economy. We long to feel close to others again, to chat, to hug, to touch, to share meals, and to meet in groups. As a Church, we long to worship, to sing, to gather, to reach out and to serve and meet needs. We'd all love to take the masks off, never to pick them up again.

But, as we have seen, and as I think we all knew, as soon as the restrictions on our movement and mingling were relaxed, the number of infections and deaths have inevitably begun to rise again.

Following Jesus and carrying our cross

Francis Collins, who is one of the world's leading scientists and has been honoured for his leadership role in overseeing the Human Genome project, is currently assisting the American government at the highest level. He is also a Christian of deep faith and I happened to notice that he was on the Alpha video, "Who is Jesus?", a few weeks ago.

I heard him interviewed a month or so ago and his approach was sobering. As a leading Christian scientist, with the most relevant and up to date data to hand, he was convicted that as followers of Christ we ought to have the highest regard for the restrictions outlined by our governments and be willing to suffer the inconvenience and loss that is necessary to restrict the spread of the virus. This particular virus, he pointed out, was not only potentially lethal but also perfectly suited to reproduce itself many times over incredibly rapidly and passed person to person with ease.

For him, counting the cost or carrying our cross right now, means learning to live within the boundaries prescribed and not seeking to get around them or wish them away - to willingly accept the restrictions on our social mobility for a time, for the sake of others.

Remaining diligent

Although the Government restrictions have lifted a little, the underlying facts have not changed and are the same now as when the outbreak first appeared. Until we have a vaccine that the majority of us have taken, the virus will continue to spread unless we take action to prevent it doing so.

As a church, we should continue to adopt an only-if-I-really-need-to approach, or an only-if-we-really-need-to attitude, to any social activity that brings us close to others. The virus is still at large, and social distancing is our most important protection.

And although reports change week by week, it looks like a vaccine is a way off yet, and the fact that our Prime Minister is talking of six more months of restrictions reinforces the sense that we will all have to be patient a while longer.

As a Church I want us to be able to say, at the end of this time, that we kept people safe, that we avoided putting people at risk and that we carried the cost of this with grace, even though it restricted our own ability to worship or gather together. I want us to be able to hold our heads up high, both as a community together, but also as individuals, as families, that we loved our neighbours well.

The call to discipleship, at the moment, is be diligent in this.

Creative adaptation

But alongside this, without compromising people's safety, we also want to work wisely to expand our ability to connect to each other, to worship, and to serve the needs of others.

Just as we have successfully opened up the Church for private prayer, Sunday worship, and a mid-week communion, and we have already begun to open up the centre, both to staff and wider community use, business and school, we are glad that we have the opportunity to develop this further over the next few weeks. With additional cleaning staff and with Jackie Church (our new Church Administrator) settling in and soon to be working Monday to Friday based at the centre, we are will be making the centre available for greater use, step by step. Please bear with us as we take time to introduce new activities and bookings at a healthy pace and as we assess the impact they have on our admin and centre team keeping everyone safe.

As we head towards Christmas, bearing in mind that we won't be able to meet outdoors as easily and as the evenings draw in, how can creatively combat social isolation, or support young mothers with small children, or support the bereaved? We are learning that this doesn't all need to be face to face, and while as a team we are committed that our premises are Covid-secure, (not an inconsiderable task), we also want to make sure that we open up the space again to help us better serve our community.

The hidden church

Lastly, I want to address the concern many of us have about the hiddenness of the Church at this time, our lack of visibility.

Whether we liked it or not, the activities and life of the Church has been severely impacted by the pandemic. The centre, which was used daily, was closed, and the doors of the main Church were locked for a number of months. Our identity as a vibrant, busy, and welcoming church was challenged.

Behind the scenes, hidden from view, the Church continued to serve, give, pray, reach out, love and act, but from the outside little of this was on show. Managers of businesses, all levels of hospital staff, and workers in numerous settings served God on their frontlines, not just making a difference through their work, but also in the way that they worked in their teams and workplaces.

At the same time, it was natural for us to move as much of our existing communications and connection points online, creatively looking for ways of reaching out and connecting. The number of people who have visited our website and watched our YouTube channel runs into the thousands.

How should we evaluate this?

Inside out

If I am honest, I am not sure. But what I do know is that God is way more interested in what is happening in the secret place of our homes, and our hearts, than he is in the public and visible demonstrations of our faith. I think we are being fined right now.

In his sermon on the mount Jesus speaks plainly. Give in secret, pray in secret, fast in secret. God is after our hearts and our full selves, not a display of outward righteousness.

We must remember too, that in many places of the world, the Church is forced to meet and act in secret. Allegiance to Jesus in these places is so costly.

In light of this, I wonder if this is all part of the gentle reformation of the Church that I mentioned earlier.

Accelerated change

For many centuries, the Church of England has been visible at every level of national life, full of authority and power. But in recent years, accelerating all the time, we are being humbled and our voice and status is being reduced bit by bit. Jesus is still King, but we are becoming less visible. As in other areas, the pandemic has accelerated what was already happening in our culture.

Be this as it may, our task is not to make ourselves visible, it is to make Christ more visible – to point people to him and to demonstrate his rule in ways which turn people to praise God (1 Peter 2:12). What matters is making him known.

For an audience of one

And all this starts with us. This is why it has been so important for me that we embraced doing the Alpha course together this term and why I am so

delighted that around 350 have participated on the course – because Alpha is about being engaged in making Jesus known, talking about him, pointing to him, and inviting people to him. And it's why I am so keen that each of us make sure that our homes are places of worship, pastoral care, and mission right now. The decentralised church is here to stay. You are the church – not me – not just here (in church buildings) – but right where you are. It's up to all of us.

So, now is the time for us to further develop and maintain personal spiritual disciplines of bible reading, sabbath, prayer and worship. It is up to each of us, individually, to make sure that we don't miss this opportunity to grow in our connection with God through this time. Whether we live in a busy home or a quiet one, God wants to meet with us, sustain us, and connect with us every day. Let's use the next six months to see real growth in this for ourselves.

The church is us

It is also part of our personal discipleship to act pastorally and missionally through this time, even though our normal ways of serving or reaching out have been disrupted. Ask God to give you opportunities to bless your neighbours, or to pastorally care for others in the church, and he will surely answer your prayers. Be practical, and kind. A card, a small gift, a phone call, or a message, can be as meaningful as any large or costly act. Regular gifts to local foodbanks are another obvious way of blessing others. These acts may be hidden from view, but these are exactly the kind of gifts that Jesus values the most (Matthew 6:1-4).

Our New Journey together

And so, as we look ahead to Christmas and to 2021, what lies ahead for us? Here are a few pointers for the months ahead.

- **A New Depth**

Since the early flush of engagement, the initial numbers of us watching services online have gradually declined. We are learning that even if being online is going to be a vital part of our future, the future of the church is not online. As a church we need to embrace this season as a time of preparation, and we need to become more expectant, more engaged, and more prayerful in our services. As a team we are learning

every week, but one thing is clear. Watching is simply not enough. We need to help each other engage deeply. This will be our goal as a leadership team – helping us all go deeper in our services, whether online or face to face.

- **A New Christmas**

Without being able to gather in large numbers, we need to prepare ourselves for celebrating Christmas in a fresh way. Planning is already under way and with a mix of livestreamed Carol services for all ages, daily family reflections, creative Advent trails, and accessible resources that we can also share with our neighbours and friends, we are hoping to be able to build on the impact of Alpha and reach out to many new people who may be looking to make sense of it all this year. It will be unlike any other Christmas, but it will still be good!

- **A New PCC**

I'm so grateful for all those who have served on our PCC this last year and those who have stood tonight. Our new PCC will have to get straight down to work in a few weeks' time, not only to reflect on the issues facing our church as we head to Christmas and beyond, but also as we discuss some new appointments, such as the Head of Operations, as Viv looks to retire, and a Head of Family Discipleship to oversee the Youth and Children's team and help us develop our work with parents. All this, as we seek God together for clarity for how to move forward in these uncertain and ever-changing times.

- **A New Social Engagement**

The pandemic brought our established ways of engaging to social need to a sudden halt. Looking to re-engage once again, in creative and safe ways, we want to develop new approaches that move us beyond service into transformation. I am delighted that over the next few years Erin is going to be taking a specific lead in this area of church life, and if you'd like to be involved in, both of us would love to hear from you, as we long to see God change lives and move beyond needing our help into wholeness.

- **A New Year**

I am excited about all the new small groups emerging post-Alpha, some working through a new course I am writing called '**Allegiance**', others focused on bible study, others taking a prayer course, and others being given some leadership training. And we will be looking at how to meet

in groups of 6 – which seems to be the maximum number who can safely meeting face to face.

- **A New Easter**

How meaningful will Easter be next year? Hopefully returning to Church more fully, we I am so looking forward to celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus together once again with joy.

- **A New Summer**

With a New Wine week to look forward to I am really hopeful that as many as possible of us will be able to get behind the all-new national **Satellites Festival** for young people, with prayer and practical support. This is going to be hosted by our very own Martin Saunders, on behalf of Youthscape.

- **A New Church Programme**

With time to review over the winter, look out for some new activities and new priorities post-Covid, as we get going again and set our sails.

- **A New Vision**

It will be important to embed our new vision of seeing God changing lives, families and Churches, again and again, making Jesus' kingdom known and inviting people into allegiance and faith in Christ.

- **A New Adventure**

A new journey setting our sails out of the harbour, out to the deep ocean beyond, where we belong.

So, thank you for reading all this.

I hope you feel encouraged that God is working his purposes out through us as we unite together around Jesus and his gospel.

May God bless us all this year, especially in these challenging times.

Richard

September 28th 2020