

## RICHARD'S REFLECTION ON 2020

### 20 years

In a couple of months, I will be celebrating 20 years in Ordained ministry. I was 33, Angus was 8 and Hebe was 5. I look back with thanks and gratitude. It's been quite a journey for us as a family.

I was ordained at Southwark Cathedral and I remember that it was an incredibly hot day in the centre of town. I had already lost my hair, but my vision was strong, and I was excited about being involved in God's great Kingdom project. We had just moved away from inner-city Bristol, where we had lived and worked for over a decade, and I was full of all that I had gained, not just from living and working there, but from my time at college, which was so rich. I was excited to be embarking on a new adventure.

My curacy was in Putney and Southfields – an area not dissimilar to Reigate in many ways, even if much closer to town – and then my first incumbency was in Twerton – an estate on the edge of Bath, a place so very different from Reigate. Here we spent 12 years seeking to make disciples, starting and running social projects, seeking to exhibit the reality of God's kingdom, and working to communicate the gospel in ways that had impact.

Just under three years ago now, we arrived here in Reigate. By the time we get to the end of June, almost a half of this time will have been in lockdown. This is certainly not the way I would have wanted it to be, but I am convinced that this not been a wasted year, by any means.

In fact, I look ahead with excitement and confidence about the way forward.

This year has sharpened my conviction and vision about the way forward for us as a church and I so look forward to **seeing God change lives, families and churches** through us as we all discover and share the spiritual gifts we each have, and God uses us as his people on mission here in Reigate. But before we get there, it is important that we take stock of the year we've had.

### The importance of telling our story

We all look back to learn, to celebrate and to grieve and we filter and process our memories by telling stories. In doing so we make sense of the world and we are able to move forward into the unknown future with greater confidence. Tomorrow is never the same yesterday, it is always an act of creation, but we instinctively know that we need to take time to make sense of the past in order to get ready for the future.

It's hard to overstate just how much our church life has been impacted by the pandemic this year. Every aspect of our community life has been touched and it's vital that we take time to look back and review.

Over the last few months, I have disciplined myself to making time for a deeper level of reflection and prayer, both to look back and to look ahead. This report is part of this process and it functions not simply as a record of the past, or as a catalogue of thanks to

those who have given so much, but as a reflection on the challenges we have faced together and the ones we are facing now as we all enter a new season of church life.

### **A sudden halt**

The significance of last year is that the pandemic, like a tsunami sweeping across us, brought so much of our normal way of doing things to an abrupt and shocking halt. As a result, this has made us all reflect deeply about the way we used to live and what it was all for. For many of us, in our personal and work lives, it has been a moment of existential reflection and it's been like this for us as a church too. It has revealed our numerous core ideas about what we believe church is for. If we are frustrated right now, it is because something core to us has been prevented from happening. If we are happy about something, it is because something central to us has changed for the better.

I can't stress enough how important it is for us to notice these frustrations and joys, to name them, to own them, and to understand them, for they reveal to us the drivers underneath our instinctive responses and actions. If we can pay attention to them, we will discover much about ourselves and better understand others too.

### **The early days**

I begin right back at the beginning of last year as the first wave of the virus swept across our world and nation. All our attention was focused on safety. We took the decision to close early, but soon, every church across the nation was closed too.

As a central team we worked hard to 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** even though we couldn't meet in person
- experimenting with ways of **loving our neighbours** in ways that were in line with the restrictions imposed on us

There were many challenges to overcome, and it was a stressful time, but it is also important to remember that these early days were marked by many good things too – a deepening connection with our neighbours and streets, a sense of a shared experience that drew us together, an openness to those in need and a willingness to offer help and support. Along with the rest of the nation we wanted to volunteer and help out – shopping, caring, helping.

I am also so grateful for the way the whole team energetically re-orientated their work and put in longer hours as we all learned new skills. We all had to rapidly improvise and adapt. This wasn't easy, as everything took us so much longer than normal and decision making was stressful, exacerbated not only by not being able to meet face to face, but by the constantly changing rules and guidelines.

## **Embracing technology and moving online**

It didn't take us long to realise that we had to embrace **online technology** in a way we had never done before by worshipping and meeting online. Inevitably it took time to master the technology available to us, and in truth we are still making sense of the good and the bad things about the new mediums we started using. Initially, it was all a bit clunky, and it sometimes still is.

While we have become more used to it now, we must remember that moving church online, overnight, was a massive task. Among other things, we quickly needed to update and redesign our website (a work still in progress) and to learn Zoom, and as a staff team we had to work out how to work remotely. Crucially we needed to learn how to worship online, and I am so grateful to everyone who joined us in helping us livestream each week, bringing the whole Church together. All this was hard for us, but it was a significant time of experiment and creativity and being online has definitely widened the scope and reach of our Church life and many new (and old) visitors have connected with us which has been great.

A special mention needs to go to Olly Brown who has been so instrumental in enabling us to broadcast each week. I don't think he has missed a Sunday for over a year and from the first week, we literally couldn't have done it without him (and a lot of his equipment too!). I am also so grateful for Ali, who worked so hard to adapt our music for this new medium and for Sam Johnson who helped with video editing. More recently Alex Coveney has spent many hours upgrading our AV system, installing miles of cables and researching late into the night, in order to get the main church ready for being able to livestream worship going forward in a professional way. It has been a huge effort and we are indebted.

A special mention also needs to go to the Youth and Children's team, especially Gen, Charles, and Martin, who have worked so hard to connect in the most creative of ways. On Sundays, and mid-week, so much effort has gone into reaching out to children, young people, and families over the last year and we can be proud of all they have given and achieved.

## **A mixed experience**

I am mindful, however, that participation and engagement in worship online has been mixed. It's certainly not the same as being together in person. So, for example, while we regularly have over 500 views on our 10.30am main weekly service, and the Heath services have been well attended, it has been evident that many have not been able to, or not found it easy to, engage in worship this year, especially in comparison to how they were able to before. We still have much to learn about this new 'hybrid' way of being church.

Individually, each of us have also had to work out what works best for us as we seek to grow in our discipleship and continue to worship. We have no choice but to embrace technology in new ways. It's been really positive to see the uptake of prayer through Lectio365 and the way that many Life Groups have grown through this time even, or perhaps because, of, zoom.

### **The second wave**

If getting through the first spring and summer was hard, September to February was harder still. Personally, like so many others this year, I had my own season of grief to negotiate and as the nights drew in and the reality of a severely restricted Christmas took hold, our resilience has been severely challenged.

While feelings of isolation and distance have been widespread among us as a community out of this has arisen a new energy for **practical concern** and care through a group of cooks who made endless meals for others, foodbank drop offs, and a group called Cherish who helped people connect, share stories and feel included.

### **The gift of our whole Church Alpha**

It felt great at the time, but looking back now, I am even more thankful that we embarked on a shared **Alpha course** together in September. It really was so significant. It held us together as a church family, all ages and all stages of faith. It brought new leaders to the fore. It deepened our relationships and it birthed new disciples. It was a triumph of organisation, as 300 zoomed each other each week for the best part of three months.

Tracing the same themes on Sundays, further helped us to stay on track together and feel that we were on the same path even though we were all missing each other desperately.

### **Christmas and winter**

Considering how different Christmas was for us all, it is amazing how well we all seemed to cope. Advent was filled with daily reflections from people of all ages across the church, and the services we shared online together were as creative as ever. Hours of work went into recording and mixing videos and songs and prayers together to help retell the story of Jesus' incarnation.

I was moved by it all and grateful.

The energy of Christmas is often naturally followed by a dip in January and February, but this winter was especially tough, especially as were families home-schooling and homeworking. Simple things like going for a walk became the only story we had to share.

### **Deepening roots post Alpha**

As we entered the New Year, we have noticed that one of the gifts of the online Alpha course was the way that it has raised the bar of discipleship across the whole church. This has been assisted by a number of other courses and groups (the Prayer Courses, the Advent groups, the Lent Course, and the Bible Course) and it has been great to see people hungry to go deeper in their relationship with God and also being sustained in community along the way.

### **Revisiting God's covenant story**

If the themes of Alpha helped hold us together in the Autumn, I am delighted in the way that the **Covenant Story** has helped us as a church this year. Sunday after Sunday, week

after week, building layer upon layer, we have revisited the way that God has been working in history since the beginning of it all, calling people into relationship with him so that they represent him in the world in God inspired ways.

Travelling through Genesis, through Exodus and the Law, through the story of Israel and her kings, her exile, and her return, we arrived at the story of Jesus in time for the climax of Holy Week. Again, it has been good, to have been following the same themes midweek as well as on Sundays.

Once again, I am so grateful to Gen and Charles, working to help connect this story to our youngest members every week.

Revisiting the big overarching biblical story has been so good for me, for us. It has reminded us that God is always inviting us into his story, to participate in his life, to exhibit his kingdom, to receive his forgiveness, to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests, a royal priesthood. We have been reminded of our truest vocation, as individuals and as a church.

### **A changing team**

Other important changes have happened in the staff team. Lynn Evans, Kate Emeny, Viv Hawes, and most recently Nikki Roessler, have moved to new work and to retirement. Simon Kruger, Mike McPhrazier, Louise Zandi and Bex Main, have all joined the team. Kattie Cornish helped out too for short while. With Tim Leask finishing up as Church Warden in September, and with Lynwen Plowman, stepping down this year, there is a new team of Wardens and Deputy Wardens.

We are so grateful to every one of these wonderful people who are so committed to the church and its mission.

### **Where are we now and what's next?**

As for what's next for us here are three specific things of note:

- As established norms of **worship** and **gathering** have been broken we are going to have to learn again about the importance and meaning of meeting together. Worshipping and gathering together will demand much more of us all than switching on Zoom or YouTube, and so do get ready to help out and serve the vision of enabling us to meet together once again.
- The need to support **discipleship within every home** has become clearer than ever and we have discovered the importance of personal disciplines like never before. Keep going in your personal walk with God, and sharing your devotional life with those around you at home.
- New ideas about how to share the goodness of God with others, to **reach out to our community** and to **see lives transformed** are emerging as we seek to move beyond the crisis of the pandemic and reaching out in relevant and effective ways, working in partnership with others, helping without hurting, and seeking to increase our reach.

### **A new season**

As we begin to return to worship in person, to gathering in small groups, and to using our amazing centre once again, I also believe that God is doing **a more fundamental work among us**, getting us ready for a new season of life as God's sent people here, armed with a gospel that will change lives, families, and churches as we invite people into discipleship to Jesus again and again.

Being ready to return to things as they were is one thing, but I believe that God is also getting us ready to step out in new ways, to take new risks, to reach out to new people, and to deepen our relationship with himself. I believe he is getting us ready for a wider and more challenging vision for the years ahead and I am looking forward to being on this journey with you.

### **Consecrating ourselves to the Lord once again**

With this in mind, over the next few weeks, as we prepare for the new beginnings the other side of June, we will be reflecting together about all that God has taught us this year through our 'Refresh Series' on Sunday and midweek. Please enter into this process, joining with others in sharing your stories and experiences to encourage and shape the learning of the whole church. Listen out for patterns and themes that God is highlighting – both for yourselves as individuals and for the church as a body. Pray and seek God earnestly at this time, inviting him to reveal to you new ways that he is asking you to be involved in serving his purposes here.

In June my hope is that we will be ready to be reconsecrated and recommissioned as a united church together for new season of life and mission. All ages, all gifts, submitting to the vision God is laying out for us.

Join me in this process. Join me in opening up your heart to God once again. Join me in recommitting yourself and your family to God once again. Join me in prayerfully, deliberately, and intentionally seeking God's kingdom above everything else as we set sail together into a new future.

**Richard Wilson**

**April 2020**