

Interim Report for the PCC - as at 28.5.20 – Canon Ed Pruen

In years to come it will be important that we have PCC documentation of the impact on parish life across the benefice from the COVID 19 pandemic.

As early as 23rd Feb 2020, (with 13 cases of Coronavirus reported in the UK), our Pewsheet requested no more intinction of the bread at Communion, sharing the peace becoming optional and we gave general advice on hygiene.

On 18th March, (with 100 UK deaths), following a directive from the government, all church buildings were to be locked.

No private or public prayer in the buildings. (To date 32 Sunday services in church buildings have been cancelled). No Messy Church, no home communions, no more School assemblies, (although I have provided online assemblies).

Churchwardens charged by Ecclesiastical Insurance to monitor and ensure the buildings were secure and risk free.

Five days later the nation was in lockdown except for essential key workers. Essential shops remaining open, while all other shops, pubs, theatres, gardens, beaches, parks closed. Family visits stopped. A national and international crisis as the pandemic develops.

Our key message: *“While the church buildings are closed, the church remains open”*.

This message was sometimes hard to communicate, and there were a small number of complaints and frustrations. There was concern that closing the church buildings during a national crisis was sending the wrong message, and that it would be hard to resume the ‘habit’ of church attendance. In fact, it has been shown that isolation seems to be breeding the opposite of spiritual apathy – there has been a huge upsurge in exploring the Christian faith.

WORSHIP

With a duty to provide worship in a different and as accessible way as possible, I immediately set about teaching myself to record services using the software *GarageBand* and uploaded onto our Benefice website. We began a subscription with *Soundcloud*. Frazer Webb, who initially built the website, made alterations at no cost.

The new website has enabled the Benefice to work together. This would not have been possible had this not been set up last year.

I consciously decided not to make videos as audio enables far more lay participation and is easier to maintain quality.

I have also made a Holy Communion video on YouTube: *‘Communion in the Rectory Garden’*.

Rev’d Peter and Rev’d Ingrid Owen-Jones also bought software and self-taught themselves to produce weekly services of Evening Prayer and special services including Ascension Day.

Lay participation has been wonderful and I am so very grateful to all concerned who have recorded music, prayers and readings in their homes and emailed it to me for editing.

Recording has been time consuming but very worthwhile and to date I have received almost 100

emails to say how much they are appreciated.

Meanwhile, the Diocese provides weekly online video Holy Communion services, led by the Bishop and his staff.

Also services available by telephone, radio and television for those without the internet.

We are required to put the numbers listening to the services in the Vestry Service Books. (NB one internet 'hit' can be for a whole family of three or four people and so the numbers of people actually listening are far more than the number of hits recorded).

Average Sunday Service hits - 114.

Average Tuesday Evening Prayer hits - 46

Of these the Alton area hits for services *and uploaded songs*: 1068

National listeners: 2433

International listeners: 237

Total hits to date: 2689.

It has been difficult to stay within copyright law and so Canon Ed has privately bought a midi keyboard to enable more original music.

Across the National Church there has been an unprecedented increase of people accessing online services, Apps for prayer, Bible readings – running into the millions.

The Villager magazine, the weekly Welcome Pewsheets have continued, Shalden began the *Coronavirus Times* which has included a church bulletin .

There have been daily briefings from the Diocese. I was asked to write a piece for this on the challenges of conducting funerals with limited attendance – this was well received.

There have been weekly online Zoom meetings with local interdenominational ministers, and regular Deanery Chapter meetings. Also online school governor meetings etc.

At the Rectory we held an online Tea party in Medstead. And I have sung a song every day for the neighbours and our FaceBook links from our balcony!

PASTORAL CARE:

During these past few months we are all having to get used to being the Church differently. It is not easy. However, our belonging to Christ has never been measured by the number of people in church on a Sunday morning (though we long for the day when this way of knowing Christ can return) but by the service and care we offer to others.

There has been a huge amount of wonderful care shown across the whole benefice – often quietly done, all much valued. Thank you. As with many, I have phoned the parishioners and especially the bereaved (over 150 people), some regularly, also using Facetime and numerous pastoral emails.

Most people seem to be surviving the lockdown, although the recently bereaved and those with underlying health conditions feeling the most vulnerable. Some have expressed considerable distress with not being able to get online shopping slots.

Foodbank. In Medstead, Margaret and I have made daily collections of donations left in the church porch and taken them to Sainsbury's. Over £500 of goods to date.

Medstead and Shalden PCCs have made donations to the local Foodbank. They require a £1000 a week, and one ton of food. (Normally one ton a month).

We have also organised parishoners who have made scrubs and masks for the local children's centre, Bushy Leaze.

OCCASIONAL OFFICES

Almost all weddings have been postponed to 2021. Much distress for couples rearranging. Benefice Administrator, Sarah Rees, has helped me to keep track of the complex rearrangements and the ever changing reserved dates.

All baptisms have been postponed - except for in emergencies.

No funerals in church. No pastoral visiting, and so everything arranged by phone calls. This has meant that I have sometimes met the bereaved for the first time at the crematorium or graveside.

Crematoriums – initially attendance was limited to a maximum of 5, now it is 20.

Cemeteries and churchyard. Initially maximum 5, now 15.

8 funerals to date, at least two due to COVID.

All are suggesting later memorial services.

Home visiting... not possible. One elderly couple came to my door angry with me for not visiting the sick.

FINANCES

Diocesan income is significantly lower with less fees from occasional offices and also the CMF contributions are expected to be dramatically lower this year. Consequently all the curates in the Diocese have been asked to be voluntarily furloughed. Some Diocesan staff have been furloughed. All stipendiary clergy taking a 2% pay cut.

There have been Diocesan discussions concerning redundancies of stipendiary clergy and early retirement for some.

We need to encourage direct giving, and perhaps also giving from what many have been able to save with less spending during the lockdown. (Recognising that for many normal income levels have been decimated).

PERSONAL IMPACT

Most local clergy have genuinely valued the change of pace.

Time with partners, time for exercise, far fewer meetings, less exhausted. However, as with everyone, annual leave has been cancelled. It has also been difficult to have clear days off as being on 24-hour call has continued unabated.

Clergy speak of not realising just how tired we were all becoming with so many evening meetings, worry re buildings, far too many services across the church buildings.

Clergy very clear they do not want to go back to the way things were. An opportunity to do things differently. A church without walls.

Having learned how to reach people through technology, this success story is being encouraged

to be maintained alongside services in church buildings. Easier for churches with more paid staff.

FUTURE PLANS

We have a duty to provide worship in whatever form we can.

But we also have a duty of care to keep everyone, including the clergy, safe.

To date the more accurate figure is that 47,000 have died in the UK as a result of the virus and this number continues to rise.

The government are now considering how and when places of worship could reopen. However, churches are very different from shops or pubs who have full time staff available to clean and manage social distancing.

Some churches have full time staff available to clean and monitor social distancing. We do not and are entirely dependent upon volunteers. It is a lot to ask volunteers to wear Personal Protection Equipment and clean surfaces adequately.

The virus can remain on some surfaces for 72 hours and the virus will kill people if it spreads. Some churches in other countries have reopened, have followed the guidelines, and yet the virus has been shown to spread within their congregations with fatal results.

Pending the rules and guidelines that the government will impose on public worship, the Diocese is preparing us to consider the viability of resuming worship in our buildings. Initially with a questionnaire to help us to explore the issues.

There are some realistic and unrealistic expectations. Some want weekly outdoor services in all four parishes, even stating that they will refuse to travel to another church for this. At the same time, they want me to continue to produce online services, preferably videos. This is unrealistic.

Realistic options may include continuing with the very successful online services while the virus pandemic is so virulent.

If, and only if, there is good weather, to occasionally conduct Benefice outdoor services to which everyone brings their own seating and remain socially distant.

Recognising that at least Shalden and Medstead church buildings(including the Church Hall) are not currently safe environments for gatherings.

Recognising that there are, in fact, at least 100 people under the age of 70 across our four congregations.

Exploring the possibility of Benefice services in Bentworth or possibly Lasham church - only if *all* the guidelines can be followed.

Canon Ed Pruen