

## Voices from the Crisis

Voices from the meeting of Rural Deans and Lay Chairs with the Bishops Staff on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020.

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*Speakers were asked to respond to any of these questions:*

- 1. What aspects of our churches' future have been brought into the present by the current crisis?*
- 2. Will 'normal' have changed? What might remain & what might default back afterwards?*
- 3. While normal service is suspended and we are viewing things differently, what do you foresee for the church of 2030?*
- 4. Should we 'seize the day' and make any changes now to prepare ourselves for this?*

### **Lydia Cook:**

I'd like to start with some good news stories. Our benefice has used Zoom for worship and group gathering rather than live streaming. We have met Tuesday to Friday for Morning Prayer, Sundays for worship - we've had a coffee morning, Bible study and plan a quiz night.

Attendance at Morning Prayer has averaged 14 where it would normally be 3. About 2/3rds of them are people who would normally have come to pray with me as I go round each village. But we have gained new people - mostly those who have been housebound. To see them being able to reconnect with their church family and be once more part of a working church has been wonderful.

I've sent out audio sermons each week which have had a far greater reach than they ever did when I preached them in a church building. I know that many clergy have connected with their villages through support networks - so in some ways we have been very missional in the last few weeks.

From a multi parish perspective through Zoom worship we have, in a stroke, overcome the geographical issues which have plagued our expression of church ever since the formation of benefices and we will certainly be looking at carrying on virtual worship in some form.

There have been losses.

Not everyone has access to a computer so questions remain about how that is managed in the short to medium term.

I'm also conscious of the element of competition that can arise or feelings of inadequacy if you are a non-tech clergy person with very limited resources. However no one can say "well my previous vicar managed the coronavirus pandemic so much better". We can be what we can be and that must be honoured and affirmed.

There are some hard realities and some hard questions that we have to face.

Parishes without deep reserves are struggling. My treasurers have done the financial forecasting for our benefice and for one of our parishes - not unique in anyway - we had budgeted for a £5k deficit with the hope this would be covered by fees and collections. Without these and without fundraising and a loss in investment income the position at the end of the year is dire with only a few thousand pounds left in unrestricted reserves.

So my first hard question is - how many churches can we afford to unlock?

Churchgoing is for some tied to habit and the building. With the length of time of lockdown especially for our more elderly congregations (which is most of them), the habit of churchgoing may be lost, but more likely the loss of confidence may be more acute. Driving again after a long time off road, being in a gathered community may present a real challenge. Those office holders who have had a break from duties may be less keen to pick them up again. With even more limited finances the task of propping up and maintaining difficult ancient buildings may feel overwhelming. Spending huge sums of money on building repairs when many of our people are going to using food banks, supporting the mortgage payments of children/grandchildren, trying to live off reduced pensions or income seems quite wrong.

My second hard question - what makes a sustainable church community? Is our Christian presence tied solely to the building or has this crisis opened our eyes to a new way of being church?

Some people might be viewing closed churches as an interruption to normal. Nothing needs to change - we simply open up and pick up where we left off with a sigh of relief. Jesus in his ministry was often interrupted. I'm thinking of the time when he was going to heal the little 12 year old girl. He was interrupted by the woman with the haemorrhage - he used the interruption creatively and offered healing and a new life. Even interruptions are times not just of sitting back but still times of ministry.

There are others who are happy to engage with different ways of being church for now. But again once the all clear is sounded will expect a return to the past. Peter after the events of Good Friday and Easter Day still announced that he was going fishing. He still defaulted back to the normal, but was gently and irrevocably reminded of his new direction by our Lord. You can't go back to fishing for fish - you have to feed my sheep. We will all be changed by our various experiences of this crisis time. There is no going back in that sense.

There are others who are seeing an opportunity to be taken and acted on. We have been living in crisis for decades - we have been managing decline while paddling furiously to revert it. Our mission remains the same - to bring people to know Jesus and know his great love. The methods we have been using for decades have been swept away - they have collapsed. And clergy and people have responded incredibly to that challenge of finding new methods. The image of new wine and old wine skins seems apt here. Going back to a book may feel reassuring but it's sure as heck going to feel odd.

My last hard question then is this. What have people missed about church? There may be the 2% who have missed corporate worship. There may be the 5-13% who have missed an Easter celebration or the opportunity to pray and reflect in stillness in our buildings. But that leaves 85- 90% who might say "Well it was still there when I walked my dog past it - was it locked?"

I appreciate these questions touch very deep into the heart of what it is to be the established church, to have a cure of souls rather than a congregational charge, to be parishes. And I know we are not very good at taking rational decisions about something that we are if we are honest a little irrational about. "I can't possibly travel to a church 2 miles away..." you get my drift. However the word BUT hangs in the air. And I can't help wonder if this is a divine "but" to my human resistance.

## **Sarah Musgrave**

**The current situation holds up a mirror to our church; how we serve the community and how the church needs to adapt.**

***'Our need for God won't change but how we enable our community to follow Jesus, will'.***

**1. What aspects of our churches' future have been brought into the present by the current crisis?**

**Present situation, exacerbated by Coronavirus**

- Our older church members contribute generously with time, money, organisation, filling the rotas, their presence etc. If their absence continues through shielding or death, there will be gaps in each of these areas.
- Younger people will have to step up, rather than deferring to older parishioners, which is a good thing.
- We're moving online – a vital part of the way forward.

## Implications

### *Worship and ministry*

- Less personal contact between priest/ LLM and each parishioner.
- Services no longer church based (as shut at the moment).
- Less travelling for priests between churches/ benefices.
- Some clergy might retire early – increased technology too big a leap.

### *Societal implications for church*

- Significant loss and grief within our communities – loss of old way of being, loss through death and ill health, loss of contact, loss of old structure, loss of physical contact, loss of friendships. (We could lose 20% of our congregations to the virus).
- Societal changes even more apparent – isolation of those without access to computers or transport, poverty, homelessness, people trapped in domestic violence and abuse or poor relationships.
- Fear and reality of unemployment, increasing divide between those who have and those who haven't.

### *Financial implications*

- Church income dropping as fewer people attend communal worship.
- Those who contribute weekly, won't have contributed and other people won't be able to give as much, if their own finances have reduced.
- Stipendiary clergy are expensive to train, house, pay and pension – Are there too many **(to leave it to the laity)** or too few to support any longer the illusion of having a viable clergy presence in every community? - Is their primary task to manage the laity who do the priestly work? (ASK)

## Opportunities

### *Community*

- There's a new spirit of community – people talking to strangers, people offering to support neighbours - somethings going on. Holy Spirit?

### *Online contact*

- Services can reach a wider audience.
- Available on demand.

### *How church is seen*

- Responding to present crisis.
- Memorial services and funerals – speaking into trauma, with hope.
- Ministry much more creative (see below).

## **2. Will 'normal' have changed? What might remain & what might default back afterwards?**

Normal *will* have changed but many will want old 'pre-corona' patterns to return – same service patterns, same contact with priest, everything personal.

### **Remain in new format (new learning that works)**

#### *Worship:*

Services will continue online.

- Why? Services can reach a wider audience.
- Available on demand, families can spend time together at sport and time together in worship, at a time that suits.
- People of all ages becoming more computer literate – Skype, Zoom, Teams, FaceTime etc.
- One of the reasons that online services work now is because there is already a relationship with a real person that such worship evokes, but it seems that the virtual world does possess a greater degree of reality than we might have thought.

We could start to live stream all services to reach those who are house bound, in hospital, residential homes, away and in schools etc.

Less emphasis on buildings, more on people.

#### *Creative ministry*

Greater care on a more regular basis – letters to everyone in the parish each week, encouraging good neighbours, encouraging contact with priests and LLMs.

- More creative ways of connecting mid-week – daily blogs, letters to all parishioners each week, phone calls, texts, Skype.
- Praying MP and EP at the same time – sending round OoS [Order of Service] and readings beforehand – inviting conversation. Could be done on Zoom.
- More creative ways of Sunday worshipping online – audio and visual services – can be joined at times that suit parishioners, therefore not affected by Sunday sport etc.

Greater creativity in pastoral and bereavement ministry.

- Carers with iPad in residential homes to pray with the dying.
- OoS sent to all those who would have attended a funeral service and all spending time 'being with' mourners during the service.
- Praying with real integrity by phone can meet some deep needs.

More creative ways of sharing faith/ hope, through praying at the same time.

### **Default back to pre-corona (things too important to lose)**

Those who can, will want to worship as a congregation.

The Eucharist.

Pastoral care through home visits.

HC to individuals and residential homes.

Children's services in church.

Eg We may need many memorial services and All Souls will become even more important.

Believers still need church for group fellowship and prayer, to talk about their spiritual needs and concerns.

Music, singing, praying together.

Sacred spaces.

### **What will never change – although the way of offering them may change**

*Our meaning and purpose as Christians.*

*Need for God and our desire to worship.*

*Mission to share the Gospel...*

*Prayer.*

*Community:* The importance of the church as a community of believers.

*Eucharist:* There will continue to be a yearning.

*Ministry:* supporting the bereaved, baptisms etc.

*Individual needs:* loneliness and isolation; grief and anger; our need to attend funerals, to be alongside the dying, to worship together, to see each other.

*Sundays being sacred.*

*Our need* for healing, prayer, deeper connection with Jesus.

*Sacred spaces.*

### **3. While normal service is suspended and we are viewing things differently, what do you foresee for the church of 2030?**

*What will the world be like in 2030?*

- The rate of change will continue to increase.
- Deep recession affecting unemployment, poverty.
- Technology will play an increasing role and in more areas of our lives.
- We'll need the church more than anything.

The Church, as it is, *does* need to change. As the world develops, the church needs to develop, too. We need to hold onto our mission but not hold on to the present model.

*Bible: Jesus gave us a new commandment to love one another as he loves us, (John 13:34-35) let's do it. Let's live our faith and rather than just joining for worship each week, let's join to live the Christian life. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that we are disciples, if we have love for one another."*

### ***So, how might we live our faith in a way that is caring, inclusive and visible?***

- 'Church' will have become a collective noun – ie the word for a collection of Christians and no longer a place, (think herd, flock etc).
- We will 'live the Christian life' rather than 'go to a church building'.

#### **Services...**

- *Online*: We will still gather for worship, but most services will be online (Zoom etc), with opportunity for conversation afterwards – both midweek and Sunday evenings –
- – or whenever one wants to 'catch-up'.
- Format may change shorter/ longer but with a daily top-up available.
- Differing provision for differing age groups.
- A variety of people would contribute without the need to leave their homes – better for some who find getting to church difficult.
- Sunday mornings would be left free for sport and family time or time for personal reflection and community projects.
- People will see each other's faces online, rather than looking at the back of the people in front.

#### **Pastoral care...**

- MP and EP could be zoomed, so that parishioners could join in and also chat afterwards.
- Some EP could be pastorally focussed, eg inviting all those who have been bereaved.
- Encourage community prayer requests.
- Small groups can run online and in person, to support those at home, in hospital, and in care homes.
- There could be prayer rooms, online – places to visit for care, sanctuary, compassion (in a similar way to prayer rooms in hospitals).
- Jesus valued everyone, as individuals. The 'church community' would support everyone to become able to 'attend' groups and worship – through providing access to computers and offering training and ongoing support.
- Wisdom and spiritual depth of the older Christians in our communities would be valued, and ways found to express this.
- We'll still meet and be together but we might offer peace at the end of an evening group, rather than just to our Sunday congregations.
- Spiritual education and nourishment available re Bible study, prayer, salvation, etc.

#### **Social action** - Christianity would become more 'relevant', speaking into our lived experience

- Our need for community would be met by coming together in social action or community social events (as well as worship).
- Parish churches could become 'Christian community hubs (CCH)', for midweek contact, as centres for socials, debt advice, talks re domestic violence, drop-ins, workshops on the environment,

groups for the unemployed with skills workshops, children's after school clubs to share the concerns that they hold, computing workshops, bereavement groups etc.

- Old computers would be donated for older parishioners and C and YP – everyone needs to be helped to embrace technology.

### **Children and young people...**

- Youth workers/ families could offer online learning and community for C and YP, with a local community bus as the focus for contact and connection, that can pick up C and YP and bring them to a CCH (Christian community hub or church building).
- C and YP will be valued for their (greater?) understanding on injustice, the environment, inequality, and will contribute by speaking into the adult world and maybe leading workshops.

### **Collaborative ministry.....**

- Priests and LLMs will work collaboratively, each using their own gifts towards the coming of the kingdom.

### **Meetings...**

- PCC meetings could be administrative and on line – Zoom etc. They would become shorter and task focussed and could relate to a wide community of 'people'.

Each PCC would have one or two fundraisers who encourage giving, particularly towards projects relating to social responsibility, the environment etc.

### **Church buildings...**

- Some would be held onto as sacred spaces – for spirituality, prayer, contemplation.
- Some would become more linked to weekly activities than for Sunday worship, so parishioners would gradually start to visit other churches.
- Therefore fewer buildings would be needed, with less financial and practical upkeep.
- Extra vicarages can be used for curate housing.

### **Priests...**

- This model would meet the need for fewer priests, more joined up worship, greater community spirit, more time for prayer and spiritual development.
- Through becoming more visible – Skype, online services, social responsibility project, computer workshops, we could reach a wider group than regulars who used to attend services, and at times that suit.

If we pray and we've got a plan, money will come and old debts will be written off. People give to a plan, rather than a deficit; with membership comes money.

Maybe, through this, we could experience the joy of seeing God's kingdom become more and more apparent around us.

### **4. Should we 'seize the day' and make any changes now to prepare ourselves for this?**

*Yes, certainly. Let's hold onto the spirit of generosity - financial, practical and spiritual that is all around us. Let's encourage this in our own communities. Let's work towards a new norm that encompasses thoughtfulness, care, and living a Christian life that is visible to all.*

# Andrew Rowland

## 1. Aspects of churches' future

Need to fully-embrace on-line presence.

Email spiritual material (national initiative).

Training of clergy to use modern e-methods.

Universal & bespoke software for parish churches – accounts packages. Stops us having to reinvent the wheel which is so energy sapping and time intensive.

Reduced number of Deaneries.

## 2. Will normal have changed? Yes!

Less personal meetings – more Zoom meetings to save travelling (time and environmental).

IT poverty – sponsor new members laptops – might boost numbers? Or lend-out same?

(You can telephone into Zoom, so not many are excluded.

Cameras to broadcast services in key churches – extend The Minster System?

Numbers attending Daily Prayers is much greater, as are mid-week communions. Great to involve multiple people in intercessional prayer rather than all done from the front. I.e. worship is more participative.

Problems getting office Holders at our delayed APCM's exacerbated by lockdown.

## 3. 2030

Even I will be 'retired' by then! I believe less classic 'vicars' in service.

Greater focus on mission and spirituality rather than tradition and intellect.

Clergy even more as overseers, enablers, encouragers rather than do-ers.

How many young curates want to be classic parish vicars anyway?

More interchangeability of clergy within larger deaneries – less parochial.

National C of E TV presence essential. More joined-up church, more co-ordinated/ corporate.

## 4 Re-organise – radically cut costs!

We have to be leaner. Far more model policies, methods of working as in educational world.

Be ready for 25% undershoot in share.

Hole in clergy pension scheme must have widened again.

## 4. Intel from Wimborne Deanery

Zoom meetings of clergy are sharing good practice and encouraging.

Villages will struggle.

Need for Stewardship Campaigns in a few months' time...



## Debbie McIsaac

1. Will 'normal' have changed? What might remain & what might default back afterwards?
2. While normal service is suspended and we are viewing things differently, what do you foresee for the church of 2030?

An article which appeared about a fortnight ago in a national weekly magazine asked the question whether the pandemic with its church closures and our inability to gather together to worship would lead to the final ruination or to the revival of the church and concluded 'whenever Christianity seems all but exhausted, it bursts into life once more.'

I hope that we will have learned much about the inherent desire in every person to do good and help others. We are learning by experience of the impact that the church can have when it attends carefully to all of the needs of the community *as members* of that community. And most have done it just brilliantly! And while pastoral work cannot be done face-to-face, the phone call (from the landline) until the battery goes dead has been so very welcome.

It is good that good use is being made of technology. As one writer put it: 'In the beginning was the Word, but ever since then the message of Jesus Christ has been adapted to whatever medium was available, from the scroll to the codex and eventually the podcast'.

But Zoomed or YouTube services will not be new church. I think that for many, they are only a stop-gap until we can gather together again as the body of Christ. I don't think when Jesus said, "for where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them", he meant the gathering was metaphorical. Our physicality matters and being in the same physical space, together, is a visceral and life-giving experience.

Being together in the church buildings, those places where people have gathered in his name and where the veil is thinner, also matters. And although the doors are closed, our churches – the people and the buildings – have regained their importance as symbols of hope for the whole community.

Saying this is not to diminish how good it has been to see familiar faces and how broadening it has been to access 'best of breed' in the variety of worship styles, traditions and especially reflections. Virtual worship and virtual gathering may become the norm for some but only where it is the quality equivalent of most of the Ted Talks. In the meantime and perhaps even in the longer term, I hope we will have the wisdom and humility to guide people in the direction of best of virtual breed for example the HTB Alpha course where there are new groups starting every week, or supplement what others are doing by arranging a local discussion after a 'watch together' session.

No matter how many new folk from your area have dipped into your virtual service, it won't really address desperate spiritual need. Through the centuries, this deepest need has been sharpened by plague or epidemic. According to a study done by the University of Copenhagen, the number of people searching Google for the word 'prayer' skyrocketed in March, doubling with every 80,000 new registered cases of the virus<sup>1</sup>.

In trying to meet this need, perhaps what matters is the answer given by each of us and by us, together, as the church to the question: What does the Christian hope look and feel like to you and for others? And how do we embody that now?

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<sup>1</sup> *In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Jeanet Sinding Bentzen University of Copenhagen, CEPR Preliminary Draft 30 March 2020

One question is 'Who are the poor and suffering amongst us?'

Whether following the Plague of Cyprian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century or the bubonic plague centuries later, Christianity grew because people saw so many Christians ministering to the sick and aiding the excluded. We cannot go amongst the people physically but we can give of our spiritual strength, our practical resources and do our outmost for those who locked in, left out or abandoned for whatever reason.

As it has always been, the young the old are often impoverished and isolated. In our time, a particular poverty and exclusion is the techno poor. It afflicts every age group, whether urban and rural, if there is no broadband or it is unaffordable, no money for hardware or software, outmoded equipment, or insufficient devices for the needs of the household. There is no vaccine against this exclusionary disease but there is treatment. So, if we put our heads together, use our contacts and the technologically adept amongst us, there may be lots we can do to communicate our message of hope to those who most need it.