

IDEAS FOR THINKING ABOUT OUR FUTURE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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After nine weeks of 'lockdown' and being unable to meet together for worship as we once did, this document offers a few general reflections and poses some questions that I hope may be helpful to many 'ordinary' parishes.

I recognise of course the challenge of writing generically. Clearly, not all that follows will apply to every situation, and many issues that are important in a particular situation may inadvertently have been forgotten.

Nevertheless, my prayer is that these reflections will be helpful and encouraging, enable us to engage well with some crucial issues, and further the growth of God's kingdom.

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A. Introduction

There is no doubt the virus' impact is considerable. Some of these impacts have been positive and others less so, for instance:

1. We are no longer able to gather together for worship as we once did. However, new ways of worshipping are emerging.

Questions:

- How do we prepare people for what might well be a paradigm shift in how we do and are church in the future?
- Who may be able to help and advise us as we explore these questions?

2. We have no idea how long the current lock-down will last, when life 'will return to normal', or even what 'normal' will look like. This leads to uncertainty for most people and anxiety for many.

Questions:

- How do we help alleviate anxiety? How can we approach anxiety in a way that will build up and encourage, rather than tire and drain? (As well as seeking to 'care and support', another way might well be to begin to address the questions in 1 above.)
- How in these unusual circumstances do we uphold and acknowledge people in their ministries?

3. Caring for one another, and particularly for those who are vulnerable and 'on the edge of things' has become much more challenging. New ways of keeping in touch with one another are emerging in

many parishes. However I suspect that we may be much better at keeping in touch with our 'friends' and those with whom we naturally get along, to the detriment of making special efforts to reach out to others, especially 'the poor, the least and the lost'.

Questions:

- How can we develop 'sustainable' ways of supporting others?
 - Who are the people still being forgotten?
 - What else could we do / who else could be involved in 'caring'?
4. Though expenditure on things like heating and lighting our church buildings is lower, giving from 'free will' offerings has reduced.
 5. It is hard to assess the impact the virus may have had on 'faith', but it is certain that it will have had some impact. Having faith in Jesus is certainly not a 'get out of jail free' card, nor does it provide us with some kind of immunity. The virus is indiscriminate. We Christians face exactly the same challenges that everyone faces; we are just as concerned for our own health, for our families and friends, for what will happen in the coming months and so on. At the same time, the risen Christ is with us, by his Spirit, and this, in theory certainly, and in practice we pray, brings a measure of hope for the future and reassurance day by day.

B. The Heart of the Matter

In very simple terms, it could be argued that at the very heart of God's call on all his people are three things:

1. To love him.
2. To love others.

3. To share that love with others.

... and to do all three with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

How have we been doing over the last few months?

1. LOVING GOD

- i. New ways of worshipping online have been emerging in many parishes, dioceses and across the national and international church. All these help us express our love for God (see Section A above).
- ii. Although anecdotal, I am aware of a number of people who have developed a new pattern of personal prayer / devotions since the outbreak of COVID-19 that has been enriching and life-giving. It would be good to find ways of harnessing this 'anecdotal evidence' to encourage others in their faith and perhaps do the same.

Questions:

- What are people finding helpful in growing as a disciple, both here and elsewhere?
- What could we offer that would offer further ways for people to deepen their discipleship?

2. LOVING OTHERS, BOTH WITHIN THE CHURCH FAMILY AND BEYOND

- i. Practical love, care and support for one another is being shown in many ways – from occasional phone calls / text messages / e-mail / Zoom calls and so on to doing shopping, collecting medicines etc.
- ii. Some homegroups, prayer groups and other groups have been able to 'meet' using Zoom and other electronic media. These all help us express our love for one another.



- iii. There are obvious gaps though. For instance, are young people 'engaged' and growing in faith? How might we better support them? Are those without access to the internet feeling isolated and neglected? How might we better support concerned wedding couples and those who are bereaved? The 'No more than ten mourners per service' rule is proving hard for some families. And, are 'the poor' likely to be even more forgotten than they were before lockdown began?
- iv. The bottom line is that we need to keep before us constantly the question Jesus asks of us, 'what does it mean to love our neighbour?' in this new situation.?
- v. We need to continue to explore together what 'loving our neighbour' means for us as local churches and as individuals.

Questions:

- How are we connecting with those without access to the internet so they don't feel isolated and neglected?
- How might we better support concerned wedding couples and those who are bereaved?
- Who are 'the poor' in our context? How might we engage well with them?
- What does it mean to be generous, to be open-hearted and care for the weak and vulnerable, whilst at the same time following government advice about social distancing and staying at home? How do we care for the weak, poor and vulnerable when we can't visit them or be with them?



3. SHARING GOD'S LOVE

- i. I wonder how, in our current situation, God might be calling us to share his love with those in our community who don't know him (yet!) or appear to have little or no interest in him? How do we do evangelism in a time of corona virus? How do we 'proclaim the one who has called us out of darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Peter 2)?

- ii. I suspect that of the three aspects to God's call mentioned in B above, this is (and probably has always been) the most difficult for us in our current circumstances.
- iii. Sharing faith is often challenging, and in a situation that will continue to be challenging for some time to come, may easily be forgotten or neglected simply because we are focussing on other things.
- iv. I want to encourage us to try to ensure that this is not the case and that we give some care and attention to what was for Jesus a key priority and, I would argue, needs to remain one for us.

Questions:

- What does faith sharing look like in a time of lock-down, social distancing and all the other consequences of coronavirus?
- What can we learn from elsewhere?
- What are the good news stories of this already happening in our own context?

DISCUSSION STARTERS

I offer the following ideas merely as 'discussion starters'... things that may be worth thinking about, discussing and praying through in each local situation.

Please note carefully that what follows are certainly not firm suggestions, just things to get you thinking at this stage. However, my prayer is that they will stimulate local discussion, out of which more ideas and ideally a plan for action may emerge.

Some tentative ideas that may be worth refining and exploring together might be:

- i. Seek to make regular contact (preferably by phone or video call) with all regular and occasional users of your church buildings and premises. (I assume that a list of such contacts is held somewhere in each parish – if not, now is a good time to create one.)
- ii. In making such contact, a 'typical' conversation might be along the following lines.
 - Check how they are, how things are going for them.
 - Explain that we are interested in and concerned for them.
 - Ask if there is anything that we can pray for them / their organisation?

This approach could be used with (i) above and indeed with (iii) and (iv) below.

- iii. Ensure existing contacts with community groups are 'kept warm' e.g. schools, residential homes, funeral directors, binmen, postal workers, teachers, clubs

and so on. I hope that this is already happening to some extent through phone calls, e-mails, newsletters. A personal contact (e.g. phone call, socially distant 'visit') is much better if at all possible. It is important though for there to be a clear overview of precisely what contacts there are, through whom and how 'warm' they are. There is a danger that some may be forgotten whilst other efforts are duplicated. Holding this overview need not necessarily be the responsibility of the incumbent.

- iv. Try to contact those in your parish with whom there is currently little or no contact for example pubs, shops, businesses, clubs and so on. This requires some initial research, ideally from a small team. This may be challenging as in many cases we will be starting from a position of zero contact and trying to build up a relationship, but I would argue that the challenge is one that needs to be addressed.
- v. All the above have the potential to build on and strengthen existing relationships and to create new ones, even if our offer to pray is not taken up.
- vi. On a different tack, I understand that across the country since 'lockdown', the number of people using search engines and looking up 'prayer and faith related' themes has reached record levels.

One online bookseller reports a doubling of orders for the bible. HTB reports a similar doubling of those enrolling for their online Alpha Course. Might our churches seek intentionally to tap into the 'spiritual searching' that some people seem to be doing, and if so, how?

- vii. For instance, many churches are offering Alpha / Christianity Explored / Start or some other faith exploration online via Zoom or one of the other platforms.

viii. What other ideas can you come up with?

Whilst we face many uncertainties at the moment, we can be sure of the fact that God is with us. He understands what we are going through. He knows the end from the beginning, is surprised by nothing, and promises us not only his presence with us, but his help, wisdom and support.

At the end of his gospel Luke tells us about Cleopas and his (or was it her?) friend on their journey to Emmaus. Chapter 24 verse 15 says that as they talked and discussed 'Jesus himself came up and walked along with them'. May we know his presence with us as we journey on.

