

THE FUTURE IS...

BY IAN PARKINSON

Many of the Christmas cards and letters I received towards the end of last year contained expressions of hope that things would be better in 2021.

Behind most of these comments lay the feeling that 2020 was a year best to be forgotten and that the New Year held out the promise of things getting back to normal as we, once again, had opportunity to do the things denied to us because of the limitations caused by the pandemic. Quite a number of these came from church leaders, more than a few of whom I know have been frustrated at the way in which church life has been so significantly disrupted over the last year.

Then Lockdown 3.0 struck, and we found ourselves restricted once again. Yet, there is still hope that, as 2021 progresses, we can contemplate the possibility of greater freedoms being restored to us. And with those greater freedoms, one of the key questions facing us is how far we want to go back to what we had before.

In particular, it will be important to reflect on what might be the positive gains of the last ten months. What new behaviours and practices has the pandemic propelled us into adopting that we

do not want to abandon too easily?

SHAKEN OR STIRRED?

Few of us relish disruption, especially when it comes upon us suddenly or in an unforeseen manner. One of the greatest threats to the fledgling Christian movement in first century Judaea was that which followed the martyrdom of Stephen. The early Christian community in Jerusalem, Luke tells us (Acts 11:19), was scattered throughout Asia Minor for fear of persecution. Unable to carry on life as normal, the first Christian leaders could be forgiven for fearing that this might deal a fatal blow to the continuance of their mission.

This scattering, however, proved to be the most significant catalyst for the growth of the Church and the wider spread of the gospel, not least because it resulted in the founding of a multi-cultural church in Antioch, which would, in due course, become the launch pad for missions to new regions, including the Gentile world.

The last few months have felt to many of us very much like a scattering. We have been

aware of the pain and discomfort this has caused, but have there equally been gains which we must not abandon when life gets back to normal?

One of the more significant aspirations articulated by the Church in the immediate prelude to the pandemic was that of releasing the ministry of all God's people, recognising that baptism, rather than ordination, was the true commissioning for ministry.

Given the shaking that the last few months have caused to the status quo, one key question to ask is what has been the impact of the pandemic upon the exercise of ministry and leadership by lay people?



Has it affected the balance, in the exercise of ministry, between lay and ordained church members?

PROFIT OR LOSS?

Conversations with church leaders suggest that there have been both gains and losses in this area.

Broadly speaking, it appears that for some there may be less lay involvement in such activities as preaching, leading and assisting in public worship, and other centrally organised church activities, than was the case twelve months ago. This is for all manner of reasons. There are fewer church services than there were prior to the pandemic, and those that do take place, either online or in church buildings, tend to be shorter and more pared back than before.

Multi-parish benefices may well hold only one online service for the entire group of churches, rather than a host of events each week. Organising and recording a service requires a particular level of technical expertise and raises many more practical issues than does turning up to play a part in a 'live' event. For all these, and a range of other reasons, there is less scope for involving other people.

Church leaders comment, too, on the difficulty of raising up new or additional people for contribution to

Sunday worship or other central activities as they are not in sufficiently close connection, week by week, with people either to talent spot potential new contributors or to spend time training and developing people in such ministries.

In contrast, some church leaders report a rise in adults, young people and children offering to record Bible readings and prayers of intercession for online services (it is less scary than reading in front of a church full of people), or willing to share their own story of faith or be interviewed for a This Time Tomorrow slot. Alongside this, some have found young people have become more involved, as some of the technical skills come more easily to them.

Whatever our experience, it is a great opportunity to reflect on what God might be doing through all of this.

Where there is a decline in lay participation in the Sunday services, is this necessarily a bad thing? Might there be a positive side to this? Might the pandemic actually have served to correct an imbalance in the way we have conceived of involvement in ministry? It is certainly the case that when lay people have articulated a sense of God's call to share in ministry that we have often tended to assume that the sphere in which that ministry should be exercised is

that of resourcing gathered church activities, and particularly worship.

Without wishing to undermine the significance of our gathering for worship, and the need to be resourced through feeding on Word and sacrament, one of the weaknesses of the contemporary Church is the way in which so much has been focused on what happens on Sundays. We have tended to neglect the importance of daily prayer and personal Bible study and of the ministry of all the baptised outside the walls of the church building. Might it be the case that, as Sunday worship has been pared back, that God's people have been encouraged to see their contribution to ministry as lying in significantly wider spheres?

Whilst we recognise lay involvement in public worship is vital – for example lay preachers contextualise teaching in ways different from clergy and lay intercessors may help us pray with greater breadth of insight – we must beware of limiting lay ministry to involvement with gathered church activities, and of treating lay ministers rather like surrogate or diluted versions of clergy.

SEIZING THE MOMENT

Lights for Christ is an initiative of the Diocese of Sheffield aimed at encouraging all God's people to grow in their walk with Christ and bear witness to him to others. Mark Cockayne, leader of the Diocesan Parish Support team, is unequivocal in his conviction that the pandemic has been a huge catalyst towards progress in the key aims of this scheme. He is not alone in recognising that there has been significant growth amongst many Christians in terms of taking responsibility for their own spiritual growth rather than relying simply on what might be provided through Sunday worship.

Small groups have become even



more significant as places for fellowship, support, learning together, spiritual growth and encouragement in mission. New groups have sprung up, and new leaders emerged in response to the desire for connection with others. One church leader rejoiced at the way in which there were now daily morning and evening gatherings for prayer in his church entirely initiated and led by lay people.

As Christians have found themselves freed from previous commitments and spending more time in their own neighbourhoods, they have begun to engage more intentionally with those neighbourhoods. Many have found themselves providing or coordinating care for the more vulnerable in their locality, engaging pastorally in new ways, or becoming prime movers in terms of stimulating community cohesion. Many have found that this has given opportunity to speak overtly about their own faith and the hope they have in Christ in new ways. Scattered into their neighbourhoods they find themselves as ambassadors for Christ with those amongst whom God has placed them.

GOING FORWARD

As we contemplate life and church life beyond the pandemic, wrestling with a few questions now might enable us to embrace the next normal more faithfully. Here are a few with which to conjure.

1. How might I stimulate my own church members to continue to take missional initiatives beyond lockdown? How can I best support and resource them in this?
2. What do I need to do to make sure that people's time and energy is not so directed towards gathered church-based activities that they are withdrawn from the front-line of mission?
3. What should Sunday worship look like and how should it be resourced if it is to be of most use in resourcing missional disciples?
4. What changes need to be made to the way in which our church life is structured and organised in order to free people up for engagement in mission and evangelism?

5. How can I encourage people to continue to take responsibility for their own personal, spiritual growth and development?

I, too, am praying and hoping that 2021 will be a better year than 2020. However, a better year for me would not be one in which we simply went back to repeating the mistakes of the pre-lockdown past. The pandemic may well have been God's way of disrupting and disturbing our adherence to practices that are ultimately unhelpful to him and to us.

My prayer is that, set free of past expectations, we might take this opportunity to recalibrate, and embrace a future in which responsibility for mission and ministry is far more dispersed amongst the whole people of God. That will require leadership which sees its primary aim as being both a catalyst for such dispersal, and also a resource for those who undertake it.

