

APCM 2020 'Covid Update'

Worship in the time of Covid

The news that public worship in the Church of England was suspended, followed soon by the lockdown of the nation, was a shattering blow to church life as we knew it. It seemed hard to imagine how corporate prayer, worship and fellowship could continue in such alien and alienating conditions. Yet they did, albeit in strange, new, and sometimes odd and limited ways. We sought to provide materials for worship and prayer at home: texts of collects and scriptures, and voice recordings of prayers, psalms and other material. Church members were inventive in locating their own online resources. And, through ZOOM, talents and ministries were shared, through online prayer and liturgy, scripture and preaching, music and song. It was strange, of course, and sometimes beset by technical limitations, but it helped people connect with God and each other. Since 4 July it has been possible to worship in church again, and it has been good to see people gradually returning to the building, while many continue to share in fellowship through ZOOM. Church life remains strange, limited and not wholly comfortable. We have been given faces, bodies, smiles and touch to relate to each other in God's presence: a separated, masked congregation is hampered from being the Body of Christ, and manifesting the glorious liberty of the children of God. Faith-sustaining sacramental life is massively hindered by the Government's restrictions. Yet the Word is heard, praise is offered, love is shared. Thank you to all who have worked so hard in manifold ways to enable this. Let us continue to lament what we have lost, hope and pray for better days, and be thankful for God's daily manna, Jesus the bread of life, sustaining us on this strange, unpredictable journey.

Derwyn Williams, Vicar

Use of church building for private prayer

I, like many others in our community, found it very difficult not to be able to access our church building during the first few months of the lockdown period. It was with much relief and joy when, in the middle of June, we reopened the church for two hours a day for prayer and quiet contemplation. This required considerable planning, with the production of guidance notes and a risk assessment plus the reorganisation within the building and the supply of suitable protective equipment and cleaning materials. The opening times are limited as we assessed that there would need to be continual stewarding, and a rota has been drawn up on a weekly basis. Since we were able to have some services back in church, we have changed the prayer times to be 11.00am -1.00pm Monday to Friday, 10.00am -11.00am Saturday, and 11.00am-11.30am Sunday. Although the numbers of visitors at times are small, there has been much appreciation of the availability of the open church, and helps to give a hint of normality in these difficult times.

Peter Rixson, Deputy Churchwarden

Fabric

One of the best ways to keep church heritage safe for the future is regular maintenance. This also saves money as when things go wrong they cost a lot to put right. Preventative maintenance also contributes to the sustainability of buildings by preserving resources and contributing to the carbon neutral agenda. By keeping buildings in good condition, churches preserve embodied carbon, save energy and the use of materials, which would otherwise be needed for repairs. (Taken from the National Churches Trust Annual Review 2019-2020).

This is something we must all respect and take note of and not least, whilst the last 6 months have not been easy, we have continued to look after the Fabric of our building. We were sad that Philip Smith stood down as Chair but is still able to give his wise knowledge which is much appreciated. We have not held meetings as a group but have continued to keep an eye on the building as a whole. Lodges, our building contractors, came in recently to repair a small plaster fall above the choirstalls and, at the same time taped over an area on The Lady Chapel roof where we experienced a small leak during the storms in August. Mike Heyhow from Lodges, and Iain Frearson, our architect, did visit as we were unsure how serious this was and whilst here, Mike did advise me/us that during the next few years we may well have to consider re-roofing The Lady Chapel and the Chancel and the Sanctuary which has not been dealt with for over 50 years. There is a small damp plaster area in the Sanctuary and a larger area on the North wall of The Lady Chapel on which we are keeping a watching brief as neither are needing urgent attention at the moment.

The Quinquennial inspection, which should have taken place this year, has been postponed and agreed by the Archdeacon to 2022 as we had quite a few months between the retirement of our previous architect and the appointment of Iain Frearson of Freeland Rees Roberts from Cambridge. My thanks to Terry Pigram and Peter Rixson for replacing bulbs in the floodlights both inside and outside of the building and also to the working party of 12 volunteers who came a few weeks ago to, particularly, clear paths, stonework etc. in the Churchyard. Also, thanks to a willing team of cleaners who have appeared on monthly Saturday mornings to ensure everything is sparkling and clean for all visitors week by week.

Finally, I am able to advise that we have now collected the stolen silver items following the break in in February 2019! We now await the repair of the stained glass window in the South Porch and this should be completed shortly, plus the two small areas in a window above the choir cupboards, which have been there for a long time.

Rosemary Thomson, Churchwarden

Financial situation as at 30th September 2020

The finances of St Michael's church have been adversely affected by the Corona Virus. Whilst the donations to the Church Giving Scheme have mostly been unaffected, there is some evidence that a few standing orders may have been cancelled or delayed. On the other hand, donations to the Collections account via normal services has been severely curtailed. As at the end of September the shortfall is £15,629.

Lettings at the WCC have had to be cancelled and we estimate the shortfall will be about £4,000.

Fees for weddings and funerals was estimated to be £5,500, but looks likely to be no more than £1,500.

On the expenditure side, general expenses will be less than anticipated, mainly due to the closure of the church for services. Since these expenses are spread over a large number of accounts it is difficult to estimate the actual figure. On the other hand, the PCC has authorised grants to the Charity Support Group totalling £15,000, £3,000 more than the budget agreed earlier this year. A further £5,000 will be released if approved at the APCM.

At the end of the year, the Finance Committee will be in a better position to make recommendations on any variation to the proposed budget.

Clive Risby, Chairman of Finance Committee

Charities Support Group activity

CSG met regularly on Zoom with members happy to participate in this format.

We have been very aware of the plight of charities, both globally and in the UK, in recent months and the wide variety of increased needs due to the pandemic. Many of our charities sent emergency appeals. Others suddenly stopped activities but once "Covid safe" could continue. They had reduced fundraising activities and required additional funds for Covid measures (e.g. CHIPS and Grove Cottage). Our group continues to seek to monitor where needs are greatest.

The PCC allocated an extra £3000 to enable us to fulfil our budgeted donations to charities whose activities were still taking place and make larger donations to a few with specific emergency needs.

The income of larger charities such as Christian Aid has suffered due absence of door-to-door envelope collections and other fundraising. We were keen to support them and two other major Christian charities in their vital work worldwide with poorer communities, including education and prepare for Covid.

Our response was to launch a Covid Red Bucket appeal in August/Sept and a local Treasure Hunt. Following many contributions, including some very generous donations, over £13,600 has been raised. We would like to thank everyone who donated. The final total will be given after Gift Aid has been calculated. We have initially donated £2000 to each of Christian Aid, Tearfund and World Vision. The red bucket pledges half the total to these charities.

In August/Sept, £8,500 was donated (in £500 tranches) to 17 of the 30 charities we regularly support, who were each identified as having a greater need for funds this year.

Val Ashwood, Chair of Charities Support Group

Churches Together Bishop's Stortford

Plans are well underway to make some provision for the housebound at Christmas, as *Company at Christmas* are in the process of deciding on the feasibility of cooking, delivery and meal provision on our special day. Sadly there will be no communal gathering or entertainment this year, but plans are being made to contact our 'guests' to ascertain their needs.

Conversely plans for the opening of *The Night Shelter* are yet to be finalised and confirmed.

The staff at *The Food Bank* worked diligently throughout this difficult time to provide basic food and other essentials to those who found themselves in need of help during this challenging year.

Holiday Bible Week was able to provide much needed fun and games albeit, online, as well as some videos and musical activities. An added benefit was that families were able to 'attend' and enjoy whilst in different parts of the country. God is Good!

The secretary of *Churches Together* worked tirelessly throughout this period to keep the various churches and associates informed of particular local circumstances and to share spiritual guidance from many sources. This included a series of noon-day prayers, to which all the churches contributed.

Margaret Fox

Communication and outreach

Very quickly, we identified a number of groups who would need different methods of support when the Coronavirus situation worsened. In mid-March, we asked for volunteers from our church family who would be interested in helping those in our St Michael's community and beyond. Operation

CommUNITY was then established so we signposted our volunteers to link with them to co-ordinate efforts. At around this time we set up prayer outreach with a prayer chain, planned and co-ordinated by Diane Pettitt.

Through our Church Insight system, we emailed daily (latterly weekly) prayers and recordings, resources and links to most in our church community (368 names). We also issue a revised weekly newsletter. Zoom worship was set up from the first week of Lockdown; and we added a phone link as soon as Zoom offered the facility in the UK. At the beginning of June, we held an open forum for discussion on future worship in the church. From mid-March, we have emailed regular messages and updates from the Vicar.

Identifying those we knew who did not have access to the internet was of paramount importance before Lockdown. From mid-March we updated those people with a special weekly guide to Sunday worship on Radio and TV. A group of dedicated volunteers delivered the daily and then weekly prayers and newsletter to those 25 people and continue to do so for those who are unable to come to church. We are immensely grateful for the faithful assistance of those helpers. We have also tried to help our friends without computers feel connected with a rota of calls from the clergy and laypeople, visits, information about the C of E and then Zoom worship phone line, printed messages from the Vicar and other church bulletins such as the Open Forum information, specially designed Quiet Day full-colour programmes and a differentiated newsletter (more pictures, fuller information than the quick-links).

We created displays to give church a more welcoming and supportive appearance in Lockdown – flowers for Mothering Sunday, Easter Flower garden with prayer signs, and a Pentecost rainbow with the opportunity to write prayers on paper doves. The Vicar's messages were also posted on our Churchyard noticeboard and posters placed on each door of the church indicating our website/Zoom worship.

We prepared a leaflet for those in Stortford North who might feel isolated and dis-connected in their new homes. This had a simple greeting as a message of support, and informed them of our Zoom worship during Lockdown. Delivery was co-ordinated by Gary Jones and, with the help of seven other volunteers, was delivered to over 400 homes in May.

Throughout this time, we have updated the website daily to reflect the changes (with thanks to Roger Sudbury's training) and regularly shared updates on social media.

Finally, we nurtured our contact with young people as best we could (as discussed in next section).

Katharine Stanley, Parish Administrator

Children and young people

Whilst the crisis has disrupted our normal teaching arrangements for children and young people (i.e. Junior Church, Choir Trebles sessions and Youth meetings have had to be suspended), an incredible amount of work has been done to keep in contact with them. This includes the Pentecost rainbow, a quiz to encourage children to visit our churchyard and look at the Website, Mothering Sunday 'smiley face' flowers, Ascension Day content, keeping our links to school strong, particularly during the 'welcome back to school' activities and of course the weekly children's activity sheets and Godly Story video link. Katharine (who has been doing an amazing job with all this work) recently emailed all our young families to see what appetite existed for a return to 'face to face' worship, Zoom sessions or other forms of worship. Those who replied gave a strong steer that they felt that physical worship would not be possible without compromising existing bubble arrangements and that Zoom sessions for young children were not likely to be successful. However, they were very supportive of the work that had been done to keep in contact with children, and asked that they be continued.

Other ideas that emerged included an outdoor prayer trail for children and possibly setting up a parent's WhatsApp group to help the families to keep in touch.

We have continued to be involved with young people, largely through Alasdair's and Val's work with Bridge Church, which since March has been continuing to meet on Zoom – with worship songs, a talk, prayers and a Gospel reading. They have held a quiz for their 'birthday' celebration, and even managed to have an online Communion on Easter Sunday! They have also held fortnightly 'Connect' discussion group sessions throughout lockdown, and weekly drop in Zoom meetings rather than meet at Thirst Cafe. Again, things are too early for a return to face-to-face worship, but Bridge Church is already planning how they might be able to restart 'mask-to-mask' in the future.

Despite of all these efforts, the Education Group remains concerned about the effects of this lack of direct teaching, and that the potential this has to break the links between Church and child. Six months is an awfully long time in the life of a child! Re-establishing that link should be a key priority for our church over the next few months as we gradually come out of the COVID crisis.

Therefore, the Education Group believe that the efforts to find a suitable person to take on the role of Families Minister (which had had to be suspended for the present) should be resumed soon – with a view to making an appointment early in the process of recovery.

Bill Macdonald, Chair of Education Group

Covid precautions: Risk Assessment and Guidance

During the period after the 'lockdown' started until churches were once again allowed to open for private prayer, the wardens' team kept an eye on the Church building and made regular visits to ensure that all was in order. As a condition for being able to re-open for prayer, and then later for services, we were obliged by law to carry out a Risk Assessment exercise, and we have also had to follow guidance issued by the Church of England's House of Bishops Recovery Group. The guidance is very extensive and has been updated regularly as the Government regulations have changed, and this means that we have had to review things frequently to make sure we keep in line with the latest position.

The Risk Assessment was based on a template produced by the Recovery Group and focused on Covid-19 specific risks. Part of the assessment was concerned with preparing the building and setting up processes to be able to start using it again safely, and part was more concerned with the ongoing procedures that we needed to implement. This part of the Risk Assessment led to us developing Guidance Notes for our various activities. At a later stage, and using the same process, we carried out a Risk Assessment and prepared Guidance Notes for the resumption of using the WCC for meetings.

The Risk Assessment and Guidance Notes for both the Church reopening and the WCC have been reviewed and approved by the PCC and have been posted on our website.

Roger Sudbury, Deputy Churchwarden