

For hundreds of years St Michael's Church has been at the heart of Christian worship in Bishop's Stortford.

The effects of the 2020-21 Lockdown on our life as a Christian Community have been massively significant, and continue to reverberate. This statement seeks to describe the church as we were before the COVID lockdown, and to reflect on the church we may become as we emerge from its restrictions.

Our community ranges in age from 0 to over 90 and has become increasingly multi-national. But regular, committed attendance at worship, and involvement in our church activities, has become rather skewed towards the older, white section of our congregation. We welcome the opportunity to diversify the age and ethnic background range in all of our worship and are keen to pursue opportunities in that direction. For many years we have run successful children and youth activities, but like many churches over recent decades, changes in social attitudes and weekend activities have accompanied a decline in the numbers of younger people attending worship.

Most of our services before 2020 were Holy Communion, often with choral music from the choir. We sing from the *Ancient and Modern* hymnbook. We also have had monthly All-Age services of an informal nature in which children and young people play a central part, and occasional special services e.g. Taizé. Sunday mornings are the main gathering of our church community, but Wednesdays are important too, with a morning Communion followed by our Tiny Tots pre-schoolers service.

Lockdown decimated our musical tradition, and hobbled both our worship and work with the old and vulnerable, and with children, young people and families. However, throughout that time we have been able to open the church for daily prayer and reflection, and for many months we have managed to hold regular 'socially distanced' services in church – with weekly Holy Communion being offered to our congregation. Lockdown has also presented us with many opportunities to try new things (Zoom participation in Scripture based worship and study, online activities for children and young people, and reflective displays in church involving Scripture and artwork).

We are currently pondering how our worship should evolve as Lockdown eases and the potential to sing and make music, and participate in Holy Communion, hopefully return and increase. We have just re-started our Tiny Tots pre-schoolers service. There is a fertile discussion to be had about how much of our old traditions we reclaim, as living, vibrant gifts for the future; and how much of the innovation and change Lockdown forced upon us, has taught us valuable lessons for the future. The re-imagining of an appointment for a future Director of Music is an important facet of that process.

Prior to the pandemic, across all our services, we could see up to 150 adults and 30 under-16s attending St Michael's. Most of the under-16s were under 8 years of age, but a number of older children, and teenagers attended, regularly or intermittently. We are eager to more effectively engage with *all* members of our parish to boost the number of young people and families attending the various services we provide, and to boost the commitment of those we reach by developing an even broader outlook of this kind.

We are blessed by having so many deeply committed members, who bring so many talents towards God's service. One of strengths is how varied our congregation is. We have members who appreciate traditional church life including our musical as it currently exists, and some who welcome the change that comes from life in the Holy Spirit. Prayer and Bible study are important to many in our congregation. Social action and charity galvanise others, engaging in voluntary work for the Night Shelter, Food Bank, Company at Christmas and many other local charities – often in conjunction with Churches Together in Bishop's Stortford. Pastoral care and outreach, within the congregation, and reaching out into the community, especially areas of new housing, also inspire a good number of us. Many of our members belong to many or even all of the above groups and partly because of that we try very hard to be welcoming, loving and united as a congregation, valuing the sense of belonging found here. Going forward we are keen to provide more opportunities for younger people and families to engage in, commit to and support church life, while being careful to continue providing for the needs of existing church members.

As well as our more regular members, we relate to many people in the town more obliquely. We have traditionally had many occasional worshipers who come at festivals, or intermittently. We have links with many schools in Bishop's Stortford, and a close and creative relationship with our St Michael's church school. Frequently the church has been used for Civic Services and Memorial services for people from the community. It is our hope that these school and community links might bear even more fruit in the future through a positive attitude to engaging the people encountered via these opportunities.

For the last few years we have been prayerfully considering about how we could and should develop our work with children, young people and their families. The effects of the pandemic has hit these groups particularly hard, but as we question our priorities in this difficult time we have a unique opportunity to 'reset' our work and worship and particularly focus on those groups. Over the next few months we will be concentrating more of our prayers, resources and time to develop this area of our ministry.