

ADDRESS

The past seven months have certainly been an exceptional time for all of us.

From the initial outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic at the start of the year ... to the total national lockdown ... to the relative relaxation of protective measures during the summer ... and from Wednesday of this week, to the array of zonal protocols up and down the country designed to restrict the spread of the virus. Whatever else we may think, we are in this for the long haul, and it is extremely unlikely that we shall come out on the other side any time soon. The most optimistic estimates which I have seen to date, speak of Easter 2021 as being the earliest possible date for some form of return to normality ... whatever that might look like.

We have seen, for the first time in living history, the closure of our schools, businesses and even our churches ... something which never took place even during the darkest days of the Second World War.

Speaking personally, and I am quite sure that many of you will agree, these have been (and remain) some of the strangest and most difficult months for us to have lived through; during which we have all been subjected to a huge amount and degree of change ... not all of which has been immediately helpful.

As I said in the preface to the Annual Report and Accounts, I am extremely grateful to all those who have played an important role in maintaining and developing the life of our Church throughout this difficult period; whether through the provision of regular information and communications to the parish, providing alternative pastoral and practical care to those in need, cleaning, maintaining and eventually opening our properties (initially for private prayer, but latterly for limited public worship on a Sunday morning), providing material and resources for our on-line daily reflections and weekly services of reflection, and offering many other forms of practical and pastoral support.

I am particularly grateful to the various Church Officers (Verger, Treasurers, Administrator, Cleaners, Members of the PCC, Churchwardens (both current and emeriti) and members of the Clergy and Reader team for their tireless efforts and support. We all owe a very large debt of thanks to them all.

As I also mentioned in the Annual Report preface, the on-going governance of Saint Michael's has largely been undertaken by the Standing Committee who have met fortnightly, taking account of the various directives and guidance of both Ecclesiastical and Governmental agencies. My particular thanks to each member of that Committee.

Throughout the pandemic, we have needed to learn how to be 'Church' in a number of different ways ... particularly through the use of social media and 'Zoom' – as we are currently doing so this evening. We have been able to enjoy daily Bible reflections, weekly Services of Reflection, Junior Zoom Church and Messy Church, and many other ventures besides. To everyone involved in these ventures, please accept my immense thanks and praise – especially to the parents of our young families who have done so much to make much of this a reality.

In short, a massive thank you to all of you for coping with the disruption and upheaval which this pandemic has brought to each of our lives.

So, what can we learn from all of this, and where do we go to from here?

As I've mentioned already, we are in this for the long haul, and there is very little possibility of our returning to normal (whatever that was in the past) in the near future.

Put simply, the Church (indeed our nation and the world) will never be quite the same in the future as what it once was.

On the plus side, people have joined together and helped one another in so many different ways – practically, pastorally and spiritually. We have seen the establishment of local groups caring for one another through shopping and visiting (whenever possible) as well as through providing support through the use of social media – and especially the telephone.

As a Church family within the local community, we simply must maintain our involvement in such ventures. I know for sure, that our weekly newsletter has been a lifeline for many, and has demonstrated that the Church is alive and well within this community. Why not take a few moments to consider to whom you might make copies of the newsletter available and either advise them of the web link or else post a copy (when permitted to do so) through their door?

Another simple thing which we can all do is to commit ourselves afresh to keeping **'In Touch'** with at least one other person – and preferably with many more than that – by means of a telephone network of contact. Pleased don't forget to include your non-Church contacts within those networks.

During the pandemic, we have, however, lost contact with some individuals ... Some of whom have passed away or moved to other areas of the country. But I am also painfully aware that some individuals may well have slipped between the cracks.

We all, therefore, need to do everything in our power to renew our contact with such individuals and seek to include them in whatever ventures we are allowed to provide.

In addition to a much-needed point of human contact, why not offer to pray for, or even with, them over the telephone whenever the occasion to do so arises? Moreover, is there someone that you could invite to Church for our Sunday Service of the Word or Communion on a Sunday morning, or even (when permitted to do so) arrange transport for them to attend. Our on-line presence is a very simple means by which we can reach out to others within the community – especially those who are not yet committed members as many of us are.

As the pandemic continues to grip our lives it is quite noticeable that many people are starting to fray at the edges. Recognising this, we must all ensure that we give each other adequate space, and recognise that an essential ingredient of being a Christian disciple is showing love and compassion whatever the cost to us personally.

Above all else, we need to keep praying for one another ... for our local communities ... for our nation and its leaders ... and for the world situation.

In summary, whatever the future holds for us, we must all maintain our vigilance in limiting the spread and effect of the Covid-19 virus, whilst at the same time continuing to provide for the effective mission and ministry of the Church within the parish and beyond.

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to afflict us all (in many instances affecting our physical, mental and spiritual health) we must each play our own part in caring for one another; whether through email, text, zoom, telephone or other forms of contact.

In particular, we must pray without ceasing for one another; that those afflicted by the virus might be treated effectively, that their friends and family may be supported and cared for, and that the effects of the virus might be limited - and eventually brought under reasonable control.

May the Lord richly bless and preserve you unto everlasting life.

Amen.