Team Magazine from St George’s

Normally, when a church magazine is being completed, controlled panic sets in – as I worry about the almost inevitable inaccuracies, typos or omissions that can creep in to any amateur publication. Since lockdown on 21 March, there has been no magazine. On Day 85 (16 June) as this is penned, I am trying to think of what can and should be reported in this first new-sized, professionally printed team offering.

In more normal times there would already have been issues in April, May and June; these would have contained a mix of news, announcements, contributions from a range of parishioners, notices, ‘thank you’s etc. We would have had the Annual Parish Meetings, elections to Leigh Deanery Synod, a new PCC. We would have pursued faculties to allow for further internal reordering and exterior improvements. We would have had ‘Families @ Four’ in better weather (but this has combined with families at sister churches into a zoomed craft activity afternoon!).

We would have had band concerts, a gin festival and other community events.

We would have welcomed a new team vicar properly …

None of which we have been able to make happen.

So not a lot to report on then?

Here goes ….........

Our church buildings may have had to be closed, but ‘church’ has continued – in new and inventive ways, allowing for resourceful, imaginative and creative thinking and ideas. Sunday Eucharistic services have been ‘streamed’ regularly at 10.00am with contributions from many in our three churches as well as Martin and Heather sharing in their home. These have not always been problem free, but that has not mattered! Additionally, evening services, special feast day services and regular Friday morning prayers have been broadcast and contributed to. Lots has been learned and several of these new practices will continue into the ‘new normal’ when we are able to resume ‘real’ services in churches again.

It has been interesting to follow the developments of ‘alternative church’ whether locally or nationally, whether traditional Anglican or emerging house groups. I’ve dipped in and out of offerings from Leigh Mission partnership, CCP, the Methodists, Kings Wigan, telephone hymns, TV services etc., (Kevin and Brian, dual residents of St Mary’s vicarage are probably my favourites!)

Pastoral support has been affected, but still goes on using mainly a telephone, the internet or social media. A virtual ‘Place of Welcome’ has been maintained either on a Thursday or Friday morning – depending on when other ‘Zoom’ meetings have had to be scheduled. Another highlight has been ‘Hal’s Pub Quiz’ n Sunday nights … with lots of work put in by compilers, lots of banter, Google as an additional team member and a fair degree of controversy!! … good fun though – and a different form of pastoral care. Mind you, we’ve all had to make our own brews (or have them made for you, like me … nothing changes there, I can hear you muttering!)

The last funeral in church was Monday 21 March. It was not an easy service. A large extended family and many friends congregating in the church yard, with only immediate family inside – still unaware of a concept of social distancing. Additional stress and trauma for already grieving folk, and definitely tense and additional pressures for vicar and undertakers. An offer of a memorial service will be made in due course, for this family and for others whose families have not been able to properly mourn together during the pandemic.

Other occasional services have had to be cancelled as well. The demand for baptisms will need careful handling when the sacrament can be offered again. Five weddings have been postponed.

And that brings in another thought – our ‘flower fairies’ have also had an extended leave of absence. I had to contact various government agencies before being assured they could not be furloughed … As well as our flower ministry folk being at a bit of a loose end, we should also remember those who contribute for flowers on both regular and anniversarial occasions; their loved ones have not been forgotten, but neither have they been able to be remembered – and that hurts too.

So floral (and arboreal) efforts have moved outside! Despite churchyard grass being almost as high as the proverbial elephants ocular organ … tremendous progress has been made by Frank, Karl, Lynne and their families and friends in improving the churchyard, uncovering long lost gravestones, resetting ‘setts’, and creating a new pastime – ‘spot the new planting’ – for those of us who regularly patrol around church. Wigan Council have suspended grass cutting during the crisis and I’m looking at alternative arrangements to tidy the place.

As refreshments can no longer be offered, the opportunity was taken to either pass on ‘in date’ cakes and biscuits to Atherton and Leigh Foodbank; and leave a note with ‘out of date’ (but perfectly edible) food in a box by the church gates – that lasted a whole 10 minutes before being ‘rescued’ by a grateful passer-by.

Our deanery wide church porch collections of food, cleaning materials and toiletries in May were hugely successful and greatly appreciated by the managers and volunteers of the food bank and the ‘Kindness’ project. There are two trays of new socks and underwear ready to go to the Leigh Homelessness Project when they are able to receive them.

Our community support continues. Local people whether parishioners or not can be incredibly kind and generous when others need help. Unfortunately, money has become a bit of a problem. No church collections have been taken or envelopes collected for over 12 weeks; church income has inevitably fallen – but church expenditure continues – and the gap is getting wider. Thank you to those who have adjusted their regular giving to bank transfer or direct debit; or other ingenious methods.

Diocesan finances continue to be in a crisis. So too, do the coffers of many voluntary organisations whose funding sources particularly via charity shops have more or less dried up. Please consider how you may be able to support Christian Aid, Tearfund, the Children’s Society and many other Christian or secular charities, hospices etc.

Church accounts for the year ending 31 December 2019 have been completed, independently examined and are ready for inspection and distribution. Many thanks to Jon Jones for continuing in an unwanted role as church treasurer, despite working ‘American’ hours and despite severe medical problems with his son Seb, at the turn of the year. When we are allowed to meet, we will arrange a handover of responsibilities to our treasurer elect and co-opted PCC member Ami Bielby.

St George’s Central School staff have worked tremendously hard adapting to the needs of key worker children at both Darlington Street and Lancaster avenue sites. A diocesan grant has been secured for new doors and windows to the current safety standards from funds allocated by central government. Governor meetings have continued online; and a new foundation governor – Mrs. Lesley Bashford has been appointed by the PCC. Many of you will know her as Lesley Duckworth, her name before marriage, as she grew up in church. Lesley is a qualified nursery teacher and senior practitioner in the Atherton Startwell Centre and a definite asset to the governing body.

And so to Mosley Common: the vicarage at St John’s has been empty since Julian and Pam moved out. Despite diocesan inspections, very little work was authorised by diocesan estates officers to be carried out. As Julian and his family had been in residence for many years, the whole house was in need of a ‘makeover’; and so, as a team appointment was to be made, St George’s has undertaken to make initial payments for a complete redecoration, and major carpeting and kitchen floor covering. Just in time, as Jonathan and Asnath moved in the day after the carpets were laid! Rev Jonathan Ruhumulize was licensed for an interim three years to Astley, Tyldesley and Mosley Common as a team vicar in April. As soon as restrictions ease, Jonathan will be introduced to the three churches, our parishioners, our schools and the wider community.

Life goes on … but not necessarily in the manner in which we knew it! Can we detect the hand of God moving us inexorably into being church for a different world?

*Iain of St Georges*

