



Tracing the golden threads

Responses from our first discernment loop

Dear sisters and brothers,

Thank you so much to all of you who have begun to engage in our listening and discerning process this Autumn and have sent your responses in to the team. We have been going through every submission and this document traces some of the 'golden threads' that have been running through the responses we have received.



Whether or not you've been able to submit responses to the first discernment loop, please do read this material. The reading group has identified seven 'golden threads' which - all seem to resonate with a final thread concerning God turning his Church towards the world. These are:

- [People](#): God is showing us that we encounter him through people and relationships
- [Simplicity](#): God is helping us to notice him (and others) more
- [Creation](#): God is catching our attention through his Creation – and showing us our need to care for it
- [Faith](#): God is helping us to grow as people and disciples
- [Church & buildings](#): God is reshaping our priorities
- [Change](#): God has been changing us (and stretching our capacity for change)
- [Children & young people](#): Whose voices is God asking us to hear?

You can read more about these threads in the following pages.

The question now, alongside our initial questions ("What are we noticing... learning...could we let go of...?") is "Does what we are hearing resonate deeply





with us?" Could it be that God is speaking in these or similar ways? What else are we hearing? The second discernment loop begins on Monday 19 October. If this will be your first go, we encourage you to engage locally afresh and for your own sake, and not to worry too much about what others have said. The resources, timetable and method for sharing your responses are all [online here](#).

Once again, I'd like to express my thanks to you all for engaging so positively in this process. None of us has a great deal of time and energy to spare - and I'm aware of how hard our ministers and volunteers are working to support our congregations and communities during this pandemic. It can be hard to be reflective when you're spending all your resources keeping things running. But I'm convinced that this is a crucial moment in our life as a diocese - and the responses below show just how powerfully the Spirit is speaking to us even now.

I'd also like to express my thanks to our reading group - a mix of diocesan officers and parish representatives - for their care in drawing out the key themes in what we're hearing so far.

Be assured of my prayers for you and your parishes as, by God's grace, we continue to seek him in all that we do,

Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin,
Bishop of Dover

12 October 2020





People

God is showing us that we encounter him through people and relationships.

An overwhelming weight of noticing and learning was to do with God's movement through people and relationships. There seemed to be such a weight of discernment in this thread that several statements are noted here:

"We have noticed that people around us in the world have been open to relationship – caring, listening, recognising each other. 'Connecting and reconnecting'. Much more 'relational' connection, noticing that 'God is relationship'."

"We are witnessing a number of people searching and seeking in a spiritual sense, with our Facebook group growing from 180 members to 315, 140 engaging with worship, only 25 of whom come to church. People are asking questions, and church members are openly talking about their faith both online and in person. How we do reimagine community in light of this development?"

"We have noticed how much more community-focussed (outside church) we are. God is not about being in the building all the time."

"...a deepening of faith in people – perhaps in people we didn't expect."

"I have learnt that God is at work in the goodness of people, whether or not they currently believe."

More provocatively:

"Organised church is too focussed on church rather than the wider community. Members of the congregation were the ones who said during lockdown that the church was not doing anything. They were not looking in the right direction. Some of us were."

All of this has led to reflection and learning:

"Some of the activities that took up our energy before need reviewing and re-shaping to better meet the needs of our community – resisting anything that draws us back into a





cosy 'club' mentality and being bold about the stuff that could be transformational. E.g. changing the coffee morning (once we can re-launch) so it also becomes a community hub."

Metaphor and discernment go together:

"...the churches are a rural landscape of fields and all the gates have been taken away, the animals are free ranging – online all over the world, new people are inhabiting our fields or experimenting or going nowhere, and we need to realise that our communities now gateless."

"I think He's also wanting us to care more for His people out in the world who don't even know Him, especially those who are very close to us in friends and family."

"It seems now is a definite turning point and we have maybe shown ourselves that it is not that hard to engage with people with issues of faith and the Gospel."

Simplicity

**God is helping us to notice him
(and others) more**

This heading could be "slow down!" Time and again we noticed that God has been more present to us in simpler, gentler, slower lives and worship. The Reading Group saw the Sabbath principle being renewed. The sense of encounter with God and clarity about what is important has been a gift of God to us within the pandemic. Within this there has been some deep learning. Part of the learning is that, if God is speaking through this, there is a need to carry our learning through:

"There is a rootedness in simplicity of the Word – more direct and concise; a simplicity of worship which is meaningful."

"What I am personally clear about is that going forward I am not going to spend too much time with the organisational side of wider church. Focussed activity or training yes but not the rest of it."





"Using technology for meetings - no more going out at night when everyone is tired."

Simplicity was often related to our use of language in worship, and therefore to mission. These kind of comments were common:

"We need to worship to be simpler and more accessible to those outside."

"Rid ourselves of formality [in worship and church] – be more open and comfortable, as we are outside the building."

Simplicity in church as in life was stressed repeatedly. Simplicity in worship and liturgical practice, simplicity in the Word, simplicity in the ways we meet and structure ourselves "simplicity and freedom": it seems that people have experienced these things and do not want to "go back to Egypt".

Creation

**God is catching our attention through his
Creation – and showing us our need to care
for it**

The simplicity theme was connected by many to a deeper awareness and delight in God's Creation. It is as if noticing God's presence and glory in Creation is helping to us to notice God's presence, movement and activity more broadly.

Observations like this were repeated many times – they were one of the most noticeable features of the responses:

"There is a rootedness in simplicity of the Word – more direct and concise; a simplicity of worship which is meaningful."

"What I am personally clear about is that going forward I am not going to spend too much time with the organisational side of wider church. Focussed activity or training yes but not the rest of it."

The Reading Group saw a kind of Jubilee theme as we noticed in the responses God's own creativity in the renewal of Creation during lockdown. Again, we wondered if this was playing





into a broader sense of renewal. Creation and the Environment (those words were used roughly equally) were repeatedly described as requiring our attention and care.

There seems a clear connection between this thread and the next one, perhaps captured in this lovely image:

"I imagine a tree putting its roots deep down into the ground to find water. It becomes strong and stable. If it sets its roots close to the surface then it will blow down in the first storm. If we do not put our complete trust and faith in God and rely on our own earthly things for strength then we are like that tree that has set its roots close to the surface. We will blow down in the first storm. Let our roots go down deep in to God and draw our strength from him."

Faith

God is helping us to grow as people and disciples

We have become deeper and taller through the pandemic so far. It is as if, with God, crisis and suffering can be used to bring about growth – who would have thought it! These are typical of many contributions:

"I have discovered that God can surprise me with joy."

The Reading Group noticed that desire, even desire for God, was part of the deepening process. This was a repeated theme:

"Learning to be still and listen more, to each other, to God, to ourselves."

"In our congregations, new and different people enabled to find their voice for the first time."

There was a sense that the learning needs carrying through, and that it can be – for example:

"A recognition that our faith needs to be 'fit for purpose' going forward and where we have taken fellowship, worship or even the opportunity to share our faith for granted we need to shape up. that we have to be more real in our relationships with one another."





"It looks as if, through this pandemic, God has challenged us to do some rethinking – about priorities in our management of time; about how we value, and connect with, other people; and about how we as a church can use our resources, increasingly including modern media, to enrich our corporate life and make it visible to others."

Church & buildings

God is reshaping our priorities

"God is inviting us to rethink the way we live and worship."

"God has allowed everything we have known about church to be stripped back and only personal relationship with God remains."

"We are discovering afresh that the future of the Church is right now."

"How will the Church be different when this pandemic is over?' And we realised, we are different already."

There were probably more observations about the burden of church buildings than any other single thing (see the table at the end of this section). Such remarks were sometimes carefully balanced:

"Church buildings can be a distraction, though for some the practical care of the building is where their gifts lie."

More often they were very clear:

"Church is people, not buildings."

"The church is everywhere and not confined to buildings."

Most of all, the responses saw the buildings as, at worst, an impediment to mission. (Bureaucratic control and external demands were seen in the same way.) Many were looking for clarity about mission, so that buildings were de-emphasised or where possible repurposed:





"A feeling amongst some that our church buildings are a time-consuming incumbrance – can we let go of them so that the time released can be more Christ-focused and people-centred?"

"We need church buildings to be hubs not Sunday sanctuaries (evidence that God is doing this already)."

"We will have to address the issue of buildings where they have become millstones around the necks of shrinking and ageing church communities and held back growth, change and missional activity in multi-parish setups because they draw so much time, energy and resources just propping them up."

Learning about how we are church was expressed in various ways (some of which has appeared in the sections above). Here is a specific, rather sharp, observation:

"Clergy-centric leadership – we really need to resist the gravitational pull to this model in the C of E, and keep the Clergy focus on releasing and equip lay leaders and Christians in their own particular calling or gifting for church, community and the secular workplace. There is a sense that some of the traditionalism that has historically shaped our churches, has got to be released to allow for fresh, diverse and invitational ways of worship to be developed... though the various PCCs still have a duty to raise funds for the fabric of their churches rather than mission and some are questioning now whether this is actually a good use of resources."

Change

God has been changing us (and stretching our capacity for change)

"We will be forced to confront changes, especially those we don't agree with. It will happen in every area of our lives. The knowledge will be uncomfortable, distressing & unwelcome & we will have to accept the alterations with grace."

Here is another dimension of the paradox noted by the Reading group – we have 'expanded' in a time of apparent constriction. We also seemed to have adapted, and quickly, in a time of insecurity:





"We are...helpless and not in control."

In general, churches of all sizes are proving more resilient than they thought in the face of a crisis – though there is also a sense of loss and disconnection with some. Specifically, where the reasons are obvious, churches are willing to embrace technology, different ways of worshipping and of being in fellowship with each other, and of offering pastoral care. Online church has sometimes had significant missional impact and in those cases will not now simply be dropped. Such churches will be 'blended' as face to face and online communities.

The Reading Group used an elastic band metaphor to reflect on what we were hearing about change. Was there a fear that we will 'ping back' from the changes presently seen as positive? Or have we moved beyond the point of elasticity into a new way of being, so that we will not go back? In many of the Responses there was a clear sense of the latter. This point will remain a question for ongoing discernment and reflection.

Children & young people

Whose voices is God asking us to hear?

"God's world is getting better."

We asked the question about Children and Young People first on the Response Form because we wanted to prioritise their discernment.

There were only 8 contributions from or on behalf of children or young people. There were some recorded intentions to engage with this group in the Second Loop, one referring to the excellent resources offered for this purpose.

The children and young people whose actual words were shared were more willing to express their anxiety and fear about the pandemic, were sensitive to the need to care for nature and the world and able to recognise God's presence in nature and love of it:

"God really cares about the planet."

"The world isn't always perfect."





"We can't always take control."

The Reading Group suggests we should keep an eye open for material from children and young people in the Second Loop.

The Group also noticed that there are other under-represented groups such as the disabled, the deaf community or housebound, or the elderly who may lack the technology or skill to tap into online church. We are poorer without their voices.

The final thread is offered as a kind of summary of all the threads. It is another metaphor:

Inside out

**God has been turning his Church towards
the world**

The Reading Group's metaphor is that it feels like God is 'turning his Church inside out'. This needs nuancing. It could be heard in a rather violent way, or as implying no growth has occurred, just a turning outwards of what there was.

However, if this is heard as a kind of extroverting, a turning outwards towards the world, it can be seen as a kind of Summary Thread:

- Worship in the public space – online worship available to all
- Community focus – across parish and denominational boundaries
- A move towards simplicity or informality – based on the perceived needs of outsiders
- A renewed concern for the 'have nots' and for social justice
- A new focus – an outward facing church concerned with people

All of these are, indeed, a kind of turning towards the world. 'God has been turning his Church towards the world.'

