

25 April 2021



Dear friends

Outward-looking Churches

I sometimes get letters from laypeople – I've had a couple just recently – asking how our churches can become more outward-looking or missional or evangelistic. These can be quite hard-hitting: "Arcane rituals and over-emphasis on eucharistic worship obscure the wider message of Christianity, even to the faithful" is one example. Another is "On looking after those who desire the *status quo ante*, we recognise their deep attachment to the familiar but the institution is in danger of terminal decline and must change sensitively."

You may not agree with absolutely everything these folk are saying – I don't – but the overall points being made are really important and deserve our attention. At heart, does our calling to pastor the faithful outweigh our responsibility to build churches which are deeply and effectively evangelistic? Tricky stuff. Are we teaching our lay folk to be active witnesses? Are we ensuring that our churches are truly outsider-friendly? Is welcoming the one more important than pandering to the ninety-nine?

I won't go on. These are important matters, and we need to address them as we begin to re-think who we are and how we operate post-covid.

Covid Recovery

Most of our clergy and churchgoers have now had one vaccination, and some have had their second, which is good news. At this rate, every adult should have been offered two doses of the vaccine by mid-autumn. All the vaccines seem very good at reducing serious illness, hospitalisation, and asymptomatic but infectious cases. We don't yet know, however, how they will stand up to the newer variants such as the one discovered in India. We don't know whether the wave of infection predicted for the autumn will be serious, or will only minimally infect a largely vaccinated population. And we don't yet know the consequences of the relaxation of travel and social distancing restrictions. On several fronts, we have to wait and see – and we would be wise to be sensibly cautious.

This fits well with what seems right on the emotional and psychological side of things. The more extrovert among us feel a need to get together again as quickly and as much as possible, while the introverts would quite like the new normal to be rather less noisy

than life pre-covid; but what is really needed both for society and the church is recovery time: small steps into freedom, but quality time to rest and recover, then to watch, listen, think, reflect, and plan.

Don't be bullied or pressured into restarting everything at once. If you do that, either under pressure from others or to meet your own needs, you will almost certainly find that some of your people are still worried and tentative, and that you have a divided and smaller church. Take time to get it right, to keep people with you. Don't do much more now than some experiments to help you see possible futures. Maybe one in-the-flesh service each week, but with midweek or evening or study events still online: that could even be the new normal. Maybe set apart a small team, clergy and lay, in each deanery or large parish to provide a high-quality online offering on behalf of all: such a proposal would be looked on favourably by your bishops and archdeacons.

But whatever steps you take over the spring and summer, make sure that you renew the batteries, rebuild the relationships, relax in the fellowship. Big decisions as to what the future should look like for your church should wait at least until later this year, and I suspect into next year.

Clergy Training Officer

Following Carys Walsh's stepping down as Curate Training Officer, I have decided on a new way forward, which I think makes sense in various ways. Chrys Tremththanmor will combine her current role of Continuing Ministry Development Officer with the role of Curate Training Officer, under a new title, Clergy Training Officer. Bishop John will also take a greater role with the curates, particularly in their regular programme of meetings. Training incumbents and curates will hear more detail over the next few days. I am grateful to John and Chrys, and think this pattern will be very good news for the curates.

Next Time

I expect to write one of my letters next weekend, to include the clergy but with a much wider circulation too, so the next of these clergy bulletins will be in a fortnight's time.

With love in Christ

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