

Life and faith in rural Britain...

COUNTRYWAY



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Being Church

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We need to talk about church

One of the most significant points in the production of any addition of Country Way is the moment when we start to think about a cover image. We're extremely fortunate to work with a brilliant design company, and Beccy, who does the bulk of the design work, has a great eye for images. But every now and again, a particular theme stumps both her and the rest of us.

This issue's theme is a prime example of this! Let's face it, exploring the concept of 'being church', particularly in our current circumstances, is a great idea spiritually and theologically but it's not easily summed up in a single image.

The Arthur Rank Centre team threw ideas around over coffee on Zoom and the suggestions were many and varied. What about a shot of Whipsnade Tree Cathedral (nationaltrust.org.uk/whipsnade-tree-cathedral), a nod to all the walks we went on in lockdown and our renewed appreciation of nature?

Or how about an image of Pennington Church's crocheted Palm Sunday installation (penningtonchurch.uk), pointing us back to the creative ways in which we shared the good news of Easter with our communities?

Given the predominance and growing importance of online worship, maybe

hands at a keyboard would be appropriate? Or an image of socially-distanced tea and cake in a garden?

In this issue of Country Way we wanted to try and engage with as many different elements of what it means to 'be church' as possible. COVID-19 and lockdown has obviously significantly shaped the focus of this edition but, as Anne Richards, Mark Betson and Elizabeth Clark explore in their articles, the future shape and direction of the Church in the UK and the wider world will depend on our willingness to allow what we've learned over the last few months to inform the way we answer some centuries-old questions about its nature and purpose.

So in this issue we've explored some significant biblical themes including exile, incarnation and love for our neighbour to see how they might encourage and inspire us to engage in mission, worship and social justice. We've listened to the ways in which different denominations have responded to COVID-19 and worked to help shape and implement policy at both the national and the local level, with all the challenges and frustrations inherent in that process.

We've heard from those working with the most vulnerable in our communities, particularly those caring for the elderly in a care home system that has been under



huge strain during this pandemic.

As ever, we've received some great stories of ways in which local churches have risen to the challenge of COVID-19 in extraordinary ways, and as we realised the importance that food played in so many responses we decided to highlight this on the cover of this issue of Country Way.

We chose an image which we hope goes some way to celebrate the very practical ways in which the Church has served, supported and loved the people in its care through the last few challenging months. If COVID-19 has taught us anything – and I think it's taught us a great deal – it's that there is no single way to 'be church'. We hope that this issue of Country Way might help to shape a conversation about what the Church might become over the next weeks, months and years.

Louise Davis

Editor, Country Way

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Arthur Rank Centre News

Saying goodbye: Peter Tacon 1950-2020

We are very saddened by the sudden and unexpected death of Peter Tacon, our Finance Manager, on 29 July. During his eight years at the Arthur Rank Centre his indomitable partnership with Jim Blumire, our bookkeeper, has kept us on the financial straight and narrow.

Peter went to Warwick School, and met his wife Lesley on a trip to London with a friend. Lesley remembers spending most of that weekend cooking, a skill immensely appreciated by the ever-practical Peter. While Lesley finished her degree, Peter finished his accounting exams, largely due to her encouragement and much to his mother's delight! They moved to their family home in Burton Green in 1977 where they were joined by daughter Judith and son Richard.

Peter always took being part of community seriously, and alongside working for Riding for the Disabled, he became treasurer to the Village Hall Committee, a role he undertook until his death thirty years later. In retirement he worked part time for Farming and Community Education (FACE, later part of Linking Education and Farming) and for the ARC.

Peter became a highly valued member of our team where we appreciated his care, his patience in answering daft questions about finance, and, in his role as Company Secretary, his dedication to ensuring that all things were under control. He had a great sense of fun, and we are glad that Lesley has shared a photo of him happy and laughing at

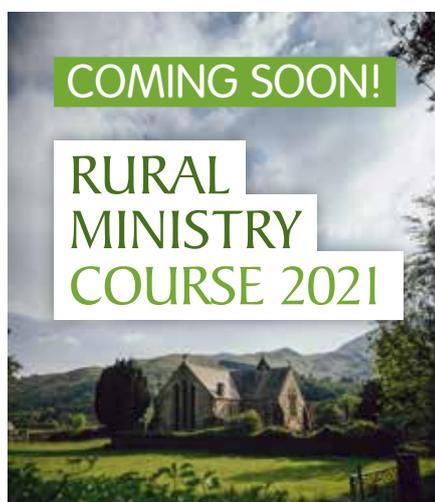


his daughter's wedding, which is how (apart from his concentrating face) we remember him.

Lesley commented when she met with Claire that 'Peter chose to continue working when he didn't need to because he enjoyed his work with ARC colleagues. Please pass on my heartfelt thanks to everyone for their kindness'.

Peter is to be buried at the church where he and Lesley married in Donyatt, Somerset. We will miss him very much.

Revd Claire Maxim
CEO, Arthur Rank Centre



Having relaunched our Rural Ministry Course in February 2020, we were almost immediately forced to cancel the next set of dates as the COVID-19 lockdown began.

However, we're really pleased to announce that we're now planning for 2021 and can confirm that we will be running two courses in early summer:

**Tuesday 11 –
Thursday 13 May 2021**

**Tuesday 15 –
Thursday 17 June 2021**

Both courses will take place at King's Park Conference Centre in Northampton. This is largely to simplify the process of ensuring that we are able to comply with COVID-19 measures that may still be in place; longer term we are looking to deliver the course in other locations around the UK but we have decided to postpone this development until 2022.

The Arthur Rank Centre introduces...

We are delighted to introduce four new members of the Arthur Rank Team! Claire Maxim, CEO of the Arthur Rank Centre said, 'Peter's death was a most unexpected and horrible shock, but our other staff news is both planned and joyful. I'm excited to be welcoming these colleagues to our organisation and looking forward to new adventures as we strive to offer the best possible support to rural Christians'. Fiona actually joined us last year in a temporary role but has now joined the team permanently. In contrast, Charles, Charlotte and Rachael joined the team during lockdown, adjusting to their new roles – and their new colleagues! – without the benefit of being able to access our Stoneleigh office or their team-mates in person. They've navigated this process with grace and generosity, and are already proving to be excellent additions to the team.



Charles Wright

Individual Giving and Supporter Engagement

(charles.wright@arthurrankcentre.org.uk)

I've joined the Arthur Rank Centre to foster and grow our relationships with churches, individuals, and other small groups. I'm looking into starting a membership scheme and new volunteer groups as well as identifying ways of increasing our revenue.

I have over 20 years' experience in the fields of charity consultancy and have worked with a very wide variety of them; the tales I could tell...!

When not at work, you'll find me looking after my wife's horses or poring over my books and collection of bookplates! I'm a Catholic and help at my tiny 'upstairs' church in rural south Warwickshire. I love travelling but think that's going to be on hold for a while; fortunately, my favourite place in the world are the Isles of Scilly.



Charlotte Maytum

Charitable Trusts and Corporate Fundraiser

(charlotte.maytum@arthurrankcentre.org.uk)

I grew up in a country parish near Exeter in Devon. After a year in Asia, I moved to the Midlands to study at Warwick University, became involved with a church in Coventry, met my husband Andy and we've been here ever since! I've mainly worked in charity and educational fundraising and volunteer management and it's great to now be part of the friendly team at the Arthur Rank Centre.

Andy and I have three young boys and a Labrador who keep us busy, and we can often be found open water swimming and taking part in cycling Sportives. I'll soon be qualified as a women's cycle leader and will be looking to introduce more women to the delights of cycling in Warwickshire which, combined with a visit to a coffee shop, would constitute my perfect day off!



Fiona Anderson

Records Officer

(fiona.anderson@arthurrankcentre.org.uk)

I am very much enjoying working at the Arthur Rank Centre and seeing the great work that the team does. My background is in IT, both in the charitable and private sectors, and more recently I've been working for a voluntary organisation in South Warwickshire. I've also volunteered for many groups and am always amazed and cheered by the contribution made to society by the voluntary sector.

I live in Leamington Spa and have spent many lockdown weekends in my garden; it's never looked so good! I'm now planning a shopping trip for winter bedding plants and spring bulbs; I've really caught the gardening bug! On the rare occasions that rain keeps me indoors I get happily lost in family history research.



Rachael Short

PR and Communications Manager

(rachael.short@arthurrankcentre.org.uk)

I started my time at the Arthur Rank Centre during lockdown; it was pretty unusual to not immediately meet my colleagues in person, but it's been fantastic to see how the team have adapted to all the changes that have been thrown at us!

I have just bought my first house with my partner, living a stone's throw from Leamington Spa in the beautiful village of Long Itchington, with our moggy, Chloe.

My academic background is in art and design, and I graduated in 2015. Since then I've been busy building my skills in traditional and digital marketing, events and membership engagement.



COVID-19: *Our* stories

RAINBOW OF HOPE

During lockdown, St Andrew's Church, Skipton (standrewsskipton.org.uk), erected a Rainbow of Hope outside its building on Newmarket Street. The six-foot high letters offered a bold and colourful message to onlookers during a challenging time.

The rainbow has become a powerful message of hope during the last few months and has been displayed in countless windows as a sign of hope. We decided to take that message and display it in our church grounds as a reminder that, despite all the difficulties we face, there is always hope. Over these last months we have seen the hope of communities coming together, the hope of key workers giving generously of themselves, the hope of improvements in our environment during lockdown, and the hope of a God who never stops loving us.

During lockdown, the doors at St Andrew's have been closed but the church has been very much alive in the community. Services have moved online, the prayer

group has flourished on Zoom, and there has been much care and concern shown to those who are isolated and shielding. Daily messages have been posted on Facebook along with children's resources, and we have plans to launch 'Messy Church in a bag'. Church members have also been volunteering with community support groups like Skipton food bank and Skipton Step into Action.

During this period of uncertainty and change, our Rainbow of Hope will be a reminder that, wherever we are, the God of hope is with us.

Revd Andrew Webb

Minister, St Andrew's Local Ecumenical Partnership (Methodist and URC)

COVID-19: A PSALM

How bright was life before lockdown!
How busy and noisy and fun.
We sang, prayed, and praised together;
God was good.

Now there is silence, and for some
darkness,
loneliness and fear.
Where is God?

The silence is broken by loud insistent
bird song,

The darkness is illuminated by a
profusion of flowers and butterflies.
We exchange smiles and greetings with
strangers.
As we learn to stop look and listen, we
are surrounded by glimpses of God:
God is here!
God is good!

Revd Elizabeth Clark

National Rural Officer for the
Methodist and United Reformed
Churches

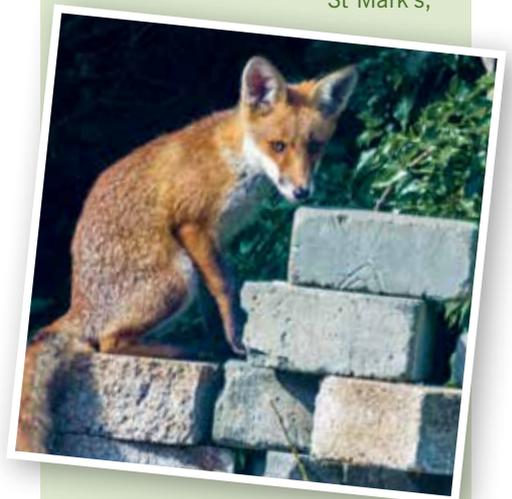
THE FOX AND THE KEY WORKER

The fox, quick and brown as any
aspiring typist knows,
looked up from the track with a
quizzical air
as the train slid slowly to a stop
in the sunny forest station and,
fixing its unperturbed stare on the
key worker,
almost the only passenger in the
carriage,
challenged her very presence there,
as if to say, this is my territory once
again;

and, as the much-reduced train
service set off,
resumed his stance on the sunny
bank,
lord and master of all he surveyed,
with little short of sheer disdain in
his gaze
for humans and their machines
in these most changed of times.

Revd Alec Brown

Priest in charge,
St Mark's,



LOCKDOWN LIFE IN MUCH WENLOCK

The last few months have felt like something out of my eldest son's sci-fi books. Every morning I think that, at any minute now, I am going to wake up from this intense dream, but I never do.

I recall the intensity of the outset of lockdown and the fear of the unknown, and how humbled I felt as individuals and community groups looked to the church to direct a shared response. My experience of Germinate Leadership came to the fore as I worked to facilitate appropriate community action, utilising people's gifts and ensuring that all groups were represented, whilst at the same time maintaining my role as parish priest.

I've developed a new relationship with my desk, computer, telephone, emails and social media, but I've found I've been able to give more time to people and work at a gentler pace! Having been very much against it at the start, I've even mastered Zoom!

I have been humbled at the way the communities in the Wenlock Group of Parishes have demonstrated neighbourly care to one another in ways large and small during the last few months. We've established Much Wenlock Mutual Aid, run by local volunteers, and our schools have demonstrated great creativity as they deliver the curriculum for pupils online whilst caring for and educating vulnerable and key worker children on the premises.

Some local businesses have changed how they work in order to meet the needs

of customers, especially the vulnerable, while others have had to close temporarily and furlough staff; many of these continue to face an uncertain future. Maintaining the work of the local food bank, whilst adjusting how it functions, was a priority that we have managed to achieve.

As a Team we have had to go about delivering pastoral care and ministry in a different kind of way, but the leadership team has gelled as a result and we have developed a greater appreciation of one another. On a personal note, some of my most powerful experiences of lockdown were the three occasions on which I administered the Last Rites over the telephone rather than in person.

We have taken worship online; it's been well received and I'm delighted that people with little or no previous church contact have joined us on a Sunday morning in a way that would not have happened were it not for COVID-19. I'm indebted to those who have assisted with online worship and have worked in a new way with the tech-savvy young people within our congregation who have faithfully helped to deliver our online worship each week. Our



online presence is here to stay and at present we have a following of around 18,000!

Our church buildings are important to us and I found it painful to be unable to celebrate Easter at Holy Trinity, but I was reminded that the church is primarily about people, not buildings. On 2 August we gathered for the first time for an open-air Eucharist in the grounds of Wenlock Priory, an act of worship that took us back to our earliest Christian roots. I concluded my sermon with these words from a wise parishioner:

'May we rediscover, as result of the journey we've been on, just how little we need, how very much we actually have, and the true value of human connection that God calls us to nurture for the Kingdom's sake.'

The wider community really appreciated the service, and we processed through the town with the Blessed Sacrament, just as the monks would have done all those years ago to bless the inhabitants in times of crisis, reminding people that Jesus is the Bread of Life. People were visibly moved, particularly when the monstrance was raised.

Revd Matthew Stafford

Team Rector, Wenlock Team of Parishes



Being church

Exile *and* Return

On Easter Sunday, I used my 'exercise' period to walk my dog down to one of the local churches at a time when the bells should have been ringing out joy. The church was, of course, locked, as per COVID-19 regulations at that time. I found there a group of people looking bewildered, wandering around in the churchyard, under the yews, staring up at the windows.

Some of these were older people who did not have, or could not use, the internet. Some were aware of the regulations but

simply did not believe that the church could be closed. Some were once-a-year Christians, who like to venture out at Easter and thought that of course something would be going on. And some were non-Christians, who just like to see the church dressed in finery and listen (outside) to the singing of Easter hymns, to feel comforted by the faith of others, or who feel safe in the presence of the building and the quiet churchyard among the trees. To find the church locked was a shock, a sadness, a bewilderment; a moment of, 'it's real, then?'

I have been in the middle of a huge number of conversations (and fights!) about what it means to 'be church' during this pandemic. Some clergy have been very angry about the closure of their buildings; many have risen mightily to the challenge of providing online worship, online prayer groups, online Bible studies, Zoom church meetings and Skype chats with parishioners. Online provision has been fantastic for the lonely, isolated, shielding, disabled, excluded, and always – not just during COVID-19 – housebound. People who



By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

(Psalm 131:1)

would be too nervous to attend in person have joined in joyfully as spectators.

I have been part of a theology group looking at missional ecclesiology, finding that we suddenly had to take on a new challenge: to wrestle with the idea of what being church is all about in a 'mission' context.

There are technical questions: can you have online sacraments? Can you ordain people, confirm people, without physical contact? Where is God working in all this? Are buildings really that important? Shall we keep a mixed economy of physical church and online church when all this is over?

These are important discussions which will go on for some considerable time and some truly wonderful things are being learned and discovered, holy habits we didn't know were possible, as local churches and people have stepped up for their communities. Some rural benefices have got together in ways that never worked in physical reality; many rural churches have been amazing at reaching and serving their communities. Some of the stories that are emerging have been so innovative and acted as a source of encouragement.

But I can't get over that little group of lost people. The ones who couldn't believe that the church door could be shut and who were incapable of imagining that the Church could be open in another way, despite all our words about that. In the scary world of lockdown, they ventured out on a sort of pilgrimage because they lacked or missed something: fellowship, sanctuary, comfort, hope.

The building wasn't necessarily where the 'Church' was for them, but it was the best signpost they had; it endured for them. They reminded me about what we take for granted: the flowers,



the candles, the singing, the people gathering and saying 'Happy Easter!' to each other, the chance to sit in the churchyard remembering loved ones and letting people of faith pass by.

'Exile' can be a tricky word to use in this situation. To be in exile is to be cut off from the place you call home, the physical space that has meaning and memory for you. To be in exile is to have your freedom limited, to have a barrier that you cannot cross. To be in exile means to miss what really mattered to you: in-person fellowship, body-language, touch, inter-generational sharing, community. My friend, Revd Juliet Kilpin, put it well when she said, referencing all these things, 'we miss doing life together'.

In scripture, the Babylonian captivity is marked by lament, loss and desperate, soul-painful longing. For some, online church is frustrating, and it can be difficult when your broadband drops out, or your husband wanders in and starts talking about a COVID-19 joke he just received on WhatsApp, when you are trying to be prayerful. Yet some people, who have been in exile from church all along, have found online church and pastoral phone calls to be liberating, embracing, a return from entrapment, exclusion or simply being forgotten.

Return from exile is not just like a road barrier lifting and being able to return home. Return needs to come with new eyes and a new appreciation for what

was lost or denied. Returning to our worship, our meetings, our fellowship of a few people gathered together needs, I think, to be formed against the background of that exile, so that we treasure our multiple ways of being church and see our new found skills and online outreach as a way of sewing all that together.

But I am never going to forget that unlikely band of pilgrims who went to church anyway, despite lockdown, despite all the risks. It was Easter Day when the women ventured out and the other disciples had locked themselves away for fear of the danger outside. Those women did not necessarily expect to get through the sealed entrance where their Lord lay (who would roll away the stone?), and yet they found Jesus anyway, alive and in the world. I would like to think that those people, in their various stages of belief and belonging, still found something of that Easter meeting to take home with them, even though there was no 'church' for them. When we are fully 'back' I hope to remember all the things those people told me about the heart's longing and lamentation for God, and appreciate God's family all the more.

Dr Anne Richards

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Being church: the new normal?

Whatever our personal experience or perspective, COVID-19 has impacted each and everyone of us. For many, the reality of COVID-19 only began to have an impact in March 2020 when lockdown was initiated and we were all told to stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives. For Christians, the Church, the most dramatic effect was the ban on gathering together and the closure of places of worship.

This initial 'command-and-control' phase was a rapid response to a potentially chaotic situation, designed to stop a greater emergency from happening. The challenge with this kind of approach is that while it can simplify a complex situation, the negative impacts are many and varied. On a societal level these include the shutting down of the economy; on a more personal level it includes isolation from friends and family, the jeopardising of livelihoods and a lack of access to activities that people love and which have sustained them in the past.

Command-and-control can only ever be a short-term solution to a complex situation; ultimately, complex situations require complex solutions. As legal restrictions are lifted we enter into the world of guidance, where it is less about being told what to do (or what not to do) and more about empowering individuals to work out how safely negotiate this 'new normal'.

It was as we moved out of the national lockdown that I was seconded from my normal work as National Rural Officer to also support the House of Bishops' Recovery Group, chaired by the Bishop of London. The principle aim of the Recovery Group is to support churches as the guidance and restrictions issued by the Government change, working across departments which deal with places of worship to enable a safe move out of lockdown for our churches and the wider communities they serve.

Our primary role is to consider the public health implications for churches of the Government guidance. But what does

this mean in practice? And how does that fit with our faith and putting our Gospel calling first?

In Luke's gospel, we discover how Jesus understood the intention of his ministry as he reads from the scroll of Isaiah, a passage which puts the poor, the shackled, the sick and the oppressed first (Luke 4:16-19 quoting Isaiah 61 and 58). A reading of the whole of Isaiah 61 reveals that it talks more about comforting those who mourn, giving them a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit, and by doing so raising up places that have been devastated. In this passage Isaiah is speaking of the whole nation of Israel, pointing out that this will not be achieved by putting our individual interests first.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, choosing to act in ways which minimise the risk of passing on the virus is taking the option for the poor and vulnerable, not just in our individual communities but nationally. If you look at the personal risk factors of those who are most impacted by the virus it is the older generation and



those with underlying and often hidden health issues. Above and beyond that it is the most vulnerable in our communities who have been most impacted by the virus, including those with insecure jobs, living in poor and overcrowded accommodation, with limited access to educational support.

The reality is that some of the key practices that are so important to us in our worship have the potential to pose a genuine threat of infection to us and to those Jesus calls us to care for. One of the biggest sources of grief has been the loss of singing, even as we tentatively move back into our buildings. It is a fundamental part of much of our worship and our offering to God, but it is also a potential vector by which we can spread the virus through aerosol and droplets. How effective a vector it is we simply do not know at the time of writing this, but by ignoring the potential risk at this time we could be impacting the vulnerable by giving the virus an avenue to spread.

In other areas, such as the use of face coverings, discerning the 'right' thing to do

is more challenging. While our knowledge about the virus and the role of face coverings in preventing its spread grows, we also know that for some face coverings can be harmful to them or for those they are supporting. This is particularly true for the deaf community where the ability to see someone's lips as they speak is a vital aid to communication.

Throughout this process we have, as a Group, sought to support churches as the guidance and restrictions issued by the Government change. While our intention is not to second guess or look for caveats in the Government guidance, we have taken steps to challenge advice that potentially harms people. One example of this is the Church of England's decision to refer to physical rather than social distancing. A fragmented society is the last thing we want at the moment: we need to be in this together if we are going to protect one another.

At the start of lockdown in mid-March, we were warned that we would have to live with COVID-19 and the resulting restrictions on our way of life – and

worship – for some time to come. Now the realisation is dawning for lots of people that, while lockdown has eased, the virus has not gone away, and we are going to have to plan to live with it a while longer.

As we adjust to this 'new normal', we have a choice to make. Grieving the temporary loss of those things that are important to us in our worship is necessary and important, but we must then resolve to prioritise the needs of the vulnerable in our churches, our communities and across society. As Jesus himself reminds us, 'just as you do it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you do it to me' (Matthew 25:40).

Revd Dr Mark Betson

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Together Apart: fresh shoots of rural partnership

As I began to understand just how serious an impact COVID-19 was to have on our nation, my mind went to the Church, and how it might be best served at this time. It quickly dawned on me that we at Rural Ministries did not have sufficient resources to help everyone. We did not have all the answers to the questions being asked; I'm not even sure if we fully understood all the issues and challenges faced by the Church. Nevertheless, I firmly believed that there was something we needed to model as a mission agency and permission-giver, that we could challenge the church to embrace: a radical display of unity.

My thoughts moved to how we might work with others to encourage and support a co-ordinated response; a response that would not only embrace the mission agencies that currently work within the rural context but also would move across denominational boundaries. Turning to Revd Claire Maxim and the team at the Arthur Rank Centre, we very quickly pulled together a group of rural voices with a view to developing a shared response to COVID-19.

I find it a little sad that it's taken something like a pandemic to enable many of us to see beyond our walls and realise that what unites us is far more potent than what divides. I needed to hear from, and work with, my sisters and brothers who may 'do church' a little differently to me; I found many of their ideas inspiring which in turn sparked off my own. After just a couple of Zoom conversations, we had each added to the concept of a co-ordinated response, and united in a way I had not seen before. With a

newfound unity in Christ, we agreed upon a weekly email to encourage, inspire and equip the rural church.

COVID-19 is potentially the biggest shake-up in the Church since the reformation. Many of us have been forced to embrace several years of change in a matter of days as we began to re-imagine how to be church in these difficult times. From my perspective, it has been a time which has given me a lot of hope. There will be many challenges ahead for each of us. Nevertheless, I am convinced the church has a bright future as long we learn some of the lessons of the past months, including the value of effective ecumenism.

In Philippians, the Apostle Paul writes, 'Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God... for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now' (Philippians 1:3-5).

I have indeed thanked God for the sisters and brothers that I have had the honour of working with as part of the Together Apart initiative. I have seen the Spirit-filled gifting in each of them; from some very thoughtful reflections, practical ideas, inspiring prayers and efficient administration and circulation, it was clear that God was and is at work. I'd love to see us now build on this as we seek to share the hope that we have in Jesus, working together to bless and grow the church, whatever the 'new normal' might be.

Revd Simon Mattholie
CEO, Rural Ministries

I'm proud that an idea from the Arthur Rank Centre was picked up and shaped by a coalition drawn from across the rural church spectrum. The initially weekly, then fortnightly, email supported rural Christians through months of limited face-to-face contact with others. This combination of reflection, prayer and action seemed to meet a need for many, and every member of the group did their best to shape their contributions to reflect both the normal cycle of spring and summer, of ploughing and planting, and the strange news that beset us week by week.

Now the challenge is to discern how we build on this collaboration, to better honour God and enable rural Christians to act together in praise and action.

Revd Claire Maxim
CEO, Arthur Rank Centre



God is always surprising, and working with colleagues from other denominations on our response to COVID-19 has helped open my eyes to new perspectives. Through the reflections of those from different traditions and backgrounds in faith I can see more of what God has on offer, which builds hope in new and surprising ways.

This is what I think the ecumenical project we have been working on has delivered as we have faced the unprecedented challenges that coronavirus has brought to us. I believe looking ahead together is the best way for us to see the future.

Revd Dr Mark Betson

National Rural Officer for the Church of England

Over the last four months it has been a privilege and a joy to collaborate with other rural practitioners to provide support, encouragement and inspiration for our rural communities. It's been great to learn from the experience, wisdom and creative gifts of others, and as we move through these unprecedented times I believe that continuing this mutual support will be imperative to enable others to respond to what the Spirit may be whispering in their context.

Revd Suzan Williams

Head of Rural Ministry for
New Wine

I have always been passionate about working ecumenically, especially in rural churches and contexts, so it has been great to be part of such a diverse group of rural organisations and practitioners. Coming together to produce reflections and share resources and stories during this difficult time has, I hope, helped to support rural Christians.

The email reflections have been so well received that I hope this is just the beginning of a new way of working together. After the upheaval caused by COVID-19 we need to listen to what God is saying to the churches and work together for the Kingdom.

Revd Elizabeth Clark

National Rural Officer for the Methodist
and United Reformed Churches

It is a great privilege to be part of this group, as we offer our own perspectives on both Bible passages and the current situation, trying to bring a rural perspective to both. Contributing to the regular reflection email has been an interesting experience. I have sometimes been surprised by the passages I have felt drawn towards – contributors are offered a choice of three readings – and I trust that this has been guided to meet the needs of those who receive the mailings.

Ann Wright

Secretary of the Churches Together
in England Churches Rural Group

The members of the Rural Response group are...

- Revd Dr Ben Aldous (Churches Together in England)
- Revd Dr Mark Betson (Church of England / Farming Community Network)
- Revd Chris Blackshaw (Church of Scotland)
- Revd Elizabeth Clark (Methodist and United Reformed Churches)
- Louise Davis (Arthur Rank Centre)
- Revd Richard Kirlaw (Agricultural Chaplains Association)
- Revd Simon Mattholie (Rural Ministries)
- Revd Claire Maxim (Arthur Rank Centre)
- Revd Barry Osborne (Rural Mission Solutions)
- Revd Rob Taylerson (Roman Catholic Church)
- Revd Suzan Williams (New Wine)
- Anne Wright (Churches Together in England Churches Rural Group)

An archive of Together Apart reflections can be found at
arthurrankcentre.org.uk/together-apart/together-apart-weekly-reflections.



Moving into the neighbourhood: *incarnation and COVID-19*

‘The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.’

John 1:14, The Message

The idea of incarnation, of God in Jesus taking on human form and coming to live amongst his people, is fundamental to our understanding of who God is. But we also believe that we as Christians are called to reflect that idea of incarnation, to live out that same understanding in the way that we live our lives day by day.

So how do we do that effectively when our ability to be together bodily is curtailed?

On 14 March 2020, Skipton and Grassington Methodist Circuit gathered for a circuit vision day. As they spent time discerning what God was calling them to, they identified three priorities: to explore new ways of worshipping together, to develop new prayer initiatives and to review the use of their buildings. Little did they know that just ten days later the start of lockdown would offer them a unique opportunity to work that vision out in practice.

In the last four months, short daily reflections have proved so popular they will continue. A Zoom prayer meeting had three times the number of attendees as those held in a draughty church hall and so they will continue in that format. Hard questions are now being asked about buildings.

As restrictions are gradually lifted, Christian communities across the UK and further afield are asking important questions about how they maintain and develop the new ways of gathering they have shared during lockdown, whilst re-engaging with the opportunities offered by the reopening of church buildings.

We know that a significant proportion of our ‘pre-lockdown congregations’ haven’t engaged with church while buildings have been closed, while at the same time people who wouldn’t darken the doorsteps of our buildings have taken part in online and video church. Our communities of faith include those who aren’t able to access technology-heavy worship but who, fearful of returning to places where they might be vulnerable to infection, have no immediate plans to return to church buildings, regardless of the robust COVID-19 protocols we put in place.

Looking beyond those who would consider themselves part of our worshipping communities, there are those whose relationships with the place where they live have changed enormously during lockdown. Those who, pre-lockdown, commuted to offices outside their village

may well have been working from home for the last few months and now feel a different sense of connection with their local community than they did before. Others will have found themselves depending on neighbours and friends for shopping and other errands.

What does it mean to be incarnational under these circumstances? How do we live the good news in our communities?

It might seem that I am posing more questions than answers, but we need to think about the changes that have happened in the church and beyond. We cannot just go back to what we have always done; this is a chance for us, like Grassington and Skipton Methodist Circuit, to make new beginnings with God. Let’s find new ways to listen to both our church and wider communities. We must be prepared to let some things go and have confidence that God will do a new thing.

Revd Elizabeth Clark

National Rural Officer for the Methodist
and United Reformed Churches
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BEING CHURCH

RESOURCES



Arthur Rank
Centre

CONFIDENT RURAL CHRISTIANS



COVID-19 REFLECTION RESOURCES

In the June 2020 issue of Country Way, we shared some resources to help you begin to process your experiences of life under lockdown. Four months on, our experiences of COVID-19 and its impact on our lives have evolved and continue to evolve.

So we thought we would offer some of those resources again, to encourage you to continue to reflect and learn from those experiences, particularly as we adjust collectively to the fact that we are likely to be living under changed circumstances for quite some time to come.

As you use these resources, consider

what tools you might use to help you process your responses; these are simply suggestions:

- Activities like baking or cooking, gardening, woodwork or any other familiar practical task can create space for 'mindful' reflection while our hands are occupied.
- Journalling can be a useful way of 'externalising' things that we haven't realised our brain is preoccupied with.
- Going for a walk or hike can connect us with the world beyond ourselves and give a new sense of perspective (but continue to observe any social

distancing or other restrictions in place in your area).

- Sharing our reflections with others – either by working through the questions together or by sharing our own thinking at a later date – can be particularly helpful; make sure that you and your conversation partner are clear about the level of confidentiality you are committing to before you start the conversation. Again, you may need to chat over the phone rather than in person, depending on what social distancing measures are still in place

FIVE STEP-BY-STEP, READY-TO-USE GUIDES

Sally Rees is the Anna Chaplaincy lead for Wales and has been instrumental in the quick and ambitious turnaround of this project, publishing five new booklets to help staff as they offer spiritual care and comfort to residents in care homes, at a time when visiting is so restricted.

She explains, 'Care staff work round the clock so are in the best position to offer people spiritual support when Anna Chaplains, ministers and families are not able to be there. In response to these new circumstances, members of the Anna Chaplaincy network have written a series of booklets to help those on the front line – both managers and carers – to provide for the spiritual needs of those they look after.'

THE BOOKLETS

The aim of the new guides is to give carers the confidence and skills to enable those in their care not only to cope emotionally and spiritually but even to thrive, despite challenging circumstances. The five titles are:

- How to take care of yourself in stressful times
- How to help someone spiritually towards the end of life
- How to worship with a group of residents
- How to worship with individuals in your care
- How to have a memorial service at home when you are unable to attend the funeral

A CARER'S GUIDE: HOW TO...

Hard-pressed care workers are on the front line in the fight against COVID-19. The public appreciates more than ever what a tough job they do in care homes, and when supporting people to live independently in their own homes. So, to support carers, BRF is publishing a range of booklets, drawing on the expertise of Anna Chaplains to Older People across the country.

At £2.50 each, with special offers on packs and bulk orders, these guides offer excellent value and are set to become a must-have resource for care home staff everywhere. For more information and to order, go to brfonline.org.uk/collections/anna-chaplaincy-carers-guides.

USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

These questions are adapted from the Appreciative Inquiry process of 'paired conversations' and are best used as part of a one-to-one conversation.

Person One asks Person Two each of these questions in turn, in the given order, and Person Two should answer each question before moving on to the next. Person One should make brief notes of the answers. Then the process should

be reversed, with Person Two leading Person One through the questions and taking brief notes.

- Describe something that happened during the COVID-19 outbreak that was a positive experience for you. Why was this? What were you glad to be able to contribute?
- What have you valued about this unusual time?

- What have you found particularly challenging about the last few months?
- Following on from your answer to question 3, identify up to three things you would like to see happen in the next few months? (Don't worry if you can only think of one!)
- What immediate steps could be taken to help achieve the things you've just identified?
- What next small step do you intend taking to set things moving in a positive direction?

Find out more about Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciating Church by going to appreciating.church.

LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK

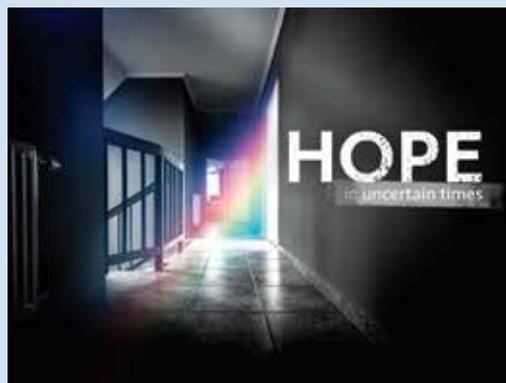
These questions are adapted from an exercise offered by the CPAS Arrow Leadership Programme.

Looking back...

- What one word best sums up your experience of living through COVID-19?
- What was the best decision you made?
- What was the greatest lesson you learned?
- What was the most loving service you performed?
- What is your biggest piece of unfinished business?
- What else do you need to do or say to be complete with your experience of COVID-19?

Looking forward

- What is God calling you to do or be next?
- What would you be most happy with completing during the rest of 2020 in response to COVID-19?
- What would you most like to see change?
- What about your ministry are you committed to changing and improving? (We encourage individuals to interpret this term in whatever way is most appropriate to them; it's not just ordained people and 'leaders' who have ministries!)
- Where have you flourished during COVID-19 and how will you continue to make that part of your life?
- What Bible passages have become important to you during COVID-19? Could you learn them by heart?
- What one word sums up your ongoing approach to learning and growing as a result of COVID-19?



HOPE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Life before lockdown wasn't always a bed of roses, but it was normal and predictable... usually. Now everything seems unknown. What does the future hold? Is there a door of hope? Hope in Uncertain Times is a giveaway booklet pointing to hope for now and for eternity. As churches re-open it is an ideal gift to give with an invitation to join your church in person or online.

You can order the booklet from the HOPE Together website; go to hopetogether.org.uk and search 'HOPE in Uncertain Times'. The website also contains an eight-minute film version of the booklet.

DID YOU KNOW...

WHEREVER YOU ARE, YOU CAN ACCESS
ALL OF OUR RESOURCES ON OUR WEBSITE

Check it out at
arthurrankcentre.org.uk



Arthur Rank
Centre

CONFIDENT RURAL CHRISTIANS

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Sharing **HOPE** in uncertain times

Church buildings might have shut, and congregations been forced to stay at home, but 2020 has inspired some amazing examples of the creativity and commitment of God's people! HOPE Together has gathered stories of some of the different ways churches have been reaching out with words and action to their villages and towns, to share the hope that Jesus brings.



Wave House Church in Newquay showed they didn't need a building to be able to worship as they pioneered Britain's first 'drive-in church' during lockdown. Dozens of participants gathered in a local carpark in their cars to sing and respond to Bible messages shared by local preachers, in a model that's now been replicated by other churches across the country.

And they didn't proclaim the gospel solely with words. Behind the scenes, Wave House volunteers were also working hard to coordinate the provision of over 1,000 healthy meals a week to vulnerable local people. In fact, churches across the country have risen to the challenge of increased need, making sure that people don't go hungry. Many have given out HOPE Together's HOPE for All magazine alongside food parcels, an engaging, accessible way to share a message of hope with people alongside practical acts of love. A special Christmas edition of HOPE for All will be available in October.

Other churches took bold steps of faith to use this time to reach out to their communities with the gospel. Thatcham Baptist Church committed to hand-deliver a copy of HOPE for All to each of the 10,000 homes in their area, working in partnership across local churches. And

it's not just community-wide efforts that are making an impact; one lady gave 72 Bibles away from a box outside her house during lockdown. Passers-by were invited to take one away free.

Rather than being forced apart by distancing regulations, many churches have used this time to become more accessible to people in their community. For some, that's meant setting up weekly meet-ups on Zoom, to which church members are encouraged to invite their neighbours. Others have established prayer hotlines, where people can contact the church for spiritual support. With many churches reporting increased 'attendance' online, the Presbyterian Church of Wales provided a recording of a church service accessible by phone so that people who are elderly and not internet-savvy could connect with the body of Christ.

HOPE Together's booklet HOPE in Uncertain Times is a great resource for churches to use to connect with people's spiritual needs at this time and is an ideal gift for Christians to give with an invitation to join their church, either in person or online.

Churches have also been hosting prayer spaces in their communities, engaging creatively with COVID-19 restrictions to ensure that these places of prayer and



hospitality comply with government guidelines. Churches in Bedfordshire rented an empty local shop, which they transformed into a HOPE Space, with the aim of inviting people to experience God by talking and listening to him in prayer. In Clevedon, Somerset, the Baptist church booked a weekly market stall as a HOPE Space so the local chaplaincy team could support people. HOPE Spaces can be in a church building, community space indoors or outside. Ideas and downloadable resources are available from our website; visit hopetogether.org.uk and search 'HOPE Spaces'.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have forced churches – and Christians – to be physically distant, but hope cannot be isolated!

Catherine Butcher

Director of Communications,
HOPE Together
@CathButcher
hopetogether.org.uk





Care homes and COVID

Anna Chaplaincy (annachaplaincy.org.uk) is a rapidly growing ministry of the Bible Reading Fellowship. Founded by Debbie Thrower ten years ago in Alton, Hampshire, its purpose is to offer spiritual care for older people, to advocate on their behalf, and to champion their contribution to the wider community at a time when many older people are feeling that they are beyond the interest and concern of their community and even, sometimes, their church.

Anna Chaplains are named after the widow, Anna, who appears with Simeon in Luke's gospel (Luke 2:36-38). Licensed by their individual churches, they are there for people of strong, little or no faith at all, and their work is intended to complement, rather than replicate or replace, ministry already being done by churches.

As Debbie Thrower explains, 'Our vision is to see an Anna Chaplain in every small- and medium-sized community in the country, and for the Anna Chaplain name to become synonymous with spiritual care for older people.'

In normal times, being an Anna Chaplain involves visiting older people wherever they may be living, whether in residential and nursing homes, sheltered housing, retirement complexes or private homes, meeting one-to-one, taking services and home communion, drinking tea, praying,

making music or simply holding someone's hand in companionable silence.

But for Anna Chaplains, as for everyone else, these have been far from normal times and they haven't been able to go into care homes or make home visits for months. 'I've hated it!', says Powys-based Revd Sally Rees, lead Anna Chaplain for Wales. 'But I'm a lot calmer now than at the beginning. For the first few weeks I was just so anxious about the people I couldn't get to.'

So how have Anna Chaplains responded to lockdown? What challenges have they faced, particularly in rural areas? And what have they learned to take forward into life beyond lockdown?

Sally describes some new ways of working: 'My ministry area is vast, geographically, and we're split across rivers and mountains. But I've got lovely teams

in all the different areas and they're the people who are walking past houses and care homes and talking to people through windows at the moment.

'I'm getting my teams of pastoral visitors to do lots of phoning, and to help them I send them resources every day. I send them a verse, a thought, a prayer and a hymn for the day. I've got wonderful pastoral visitors with big hearts but they can find it difficult to pray spontaneously with people on the phone, so if they've got something to read to people, or start the conversation, that can be really helpful.'

At the other end of the country, in the ex-mining village of Shilbottle near Alnwick, lay reader Margaret Weaver helps to train Anna Chaplains and had the satisfaction of seeing 34 new members of the network commissioned in Morpeth in February. She tells a similar story:





‘Normally I do home communions, but during lockdown I’ve been involved in developing prayer-come-worship leaflets for the care home. People have been on their own in their rooms during these twelve weeks, so the leaflets are designed for individual use. We’ve just had to hand them in at the care home door.’

‘Parish-wise, we each have a list of people we ring every week for a chat, and to see if they need anything. We’ve discovered telephone conferencing! By using tele-conferencing we can make Zoom church services available to those who don’t have the internet.’

‘I’ve also used tele-conferencing for the monthly Monday afternoon church and last month we had twenty people on the call. My husband and I delivered the service sheets beforehand, and we also took little gift boxes with a serviette, a teabag and an individually wrapped cake so they could still have their tea after the service. I think they appreciated the cake more than anything else we’ve done. It really made them feel they’re still part of things.’

Former vet Nicky Smallwood is a part-time Anna Chaplain in a rural benefice in Hampshire, where she has built a team of six volunteer helpers known as Anna Friends. When Nicky’s usual Anna Chaplaincy activities – including playing the guitar and singing with care home residents in their rooms – became impossible, she turned to technology like everyone else, but found low-tech letters and DVDs of services to be just as important in the effort to keep everyone connected.

‘Each Anna Friend has a list of six or seven people that they write to each week, and one of them puts our church services onto DVD for the care homes. They’re thrilled to have them. It seems to be easier than struggling to access something online.’

But for all the inventive ways Anna Chaplains have found to support older people in their churches and communities, Sally Rees is the first to say that lockdown has been hard:

‘When I was called to older people’s ministry, I decided that I would worship

with the older congregations. These are people – all aged 80-plus – who absolutely love the building, in a way that perhaps younger people don’t “get”. So I think we are still “being church”, but we’re not gathering and that’s very sad for people. I just have the sense that these are going to be the last congregations to gather, and very sadly, some of these people may never go to church again because of their age and frailty.’

Most Anna Chaplains think that they’ll be continuing with their new ways of working for some time to come. And as Margaret Weaver explains, that has its upside: ‘There are a lot of people who aren’t ready to start going out again. Others are saying they’re not going to go to church if they can’t sing. But church is not necessarily the building, it’s the people. Despite the isolation, relationships are growing. Dropping off the service sheets can open up the way for a telephone conversation, which probably wouldn’t have happened before. One lady is partially-sighted and can’t read the service sheet, but I ring her and read it to her. Our Monday afternoon online and telephone church has grown. The new people might not stay longer term once we’re actually back in church, but it’s really good they’re engaging with us at the moment.’

Eley McAinsh

Press and Media Officer,
Bible Reading Fellowship



BRF and Anna Chaplaincy have published five booklets for carers to help them take care of themselves amidst all the pressures of the coronavirus pandemic, and to give them the resources and confidence to offer spiritual care to care home residents when other visitors are not allowed. For more information, go to annachaplaincy.org.uk/post/new-booklets-to-give-your-care-staff.



Rural Mission

CONNECTING DURING LOCKDOWN: A QUIET DAY AT HOME

The measures we are having to take in order to help slow down the spread of COVID-19 mean we need to start looking at doing things differently and more creatively. These difficult times provide both challenges and opportunities, the first ultimately making us stronger and more resilient, the second offering fresh approaches to both routine and special activities.

When our quiet day at Langford Lakes had to be cancelled, we decided to have a quiet day at home instead, on 31 March. The theme was Thin Places, drawing on Celtic Christianity's tradition of seeking to experience God more directly, usually in a physical place where the boundary between heaven and earth is especially thin and the divine can be sensed more readily. Throughout life, we are drawn to places that bring calm or inspiration, sanctuary or distraction. Wherever those places are, they effect some kind of positive change in us: they transform us, so that when we leave them, we feel all the better for having been there.

'Jesus took with him Peter and James and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun.'

(Matthew 17:1-2)

We began the day with Morning Prayer before moving into a repeating pattern of reflection, Bible readings, prayer and activity, and concluding with a socially-distanced walk. We explored Biblical stories of locations where heaven and earth met – Eden and Sinai, for example – Celtic thin places, such as Iona and Lindisfarne, and those with which we are more regularly familiar, including churches and cathedrals. As the day progressed, it felt like we were creating our own thin places, our own intimacy with God, connecting both with the divine and those travelling with us.

Perhaps our current greatly restricted circumstances might be seen as a chance to discover our own thin places, and to be transformed and inspired by them. For

although we do not know what lies ahead, we are fairly certain that life will not be the same. 'Thin Places', a poem by Jenny Bridgman, ends in a verse that sums up both life in general and the unprecedented times we are experiencing:

'We do not leave unchanged
If change is to become ourselves.
Ahead: a thousand moments of
transfiguration,
Each one a death – and resurrection – in
itself,
As we are both transformed and transform,
Sacred moment by sacred moment.'

Revd Jonathan Plows

Priest in charge, Wylde and Till Valley

'I had a wonderful walk seeing new buds of growth and spectacular blossom and spring flowers. The Celtic traditions work for me in so many ways, the poetry of the language used in so much material. God in Nature speaks in glimpses when you least expect.'



'I found the resources really helpful to dip in and out of. I did a colouring-in of one of the Celtic crosses, such a joyous experience as I had just found my old school Caran D'Ache crayons and it was so wonderful to sharpen them and enjoy being simply in the moment listening to some of the Celtic music you suggested at the same time.'

'I shall now endeavour to be more contemplative and to look for Thin Places every day. And now I know that only by looking will I find them.'

A BLESSING

Holy Father,
in our waking and in our rising,
in our doing and in our being,
in our striding along the pathways,
walk with us and bless us.

Holy Son,
in our hopes and in our dreams,
in our cares and in our pauses,
in our breathlessness and in our anxieties,
walk beside us and bless us.

Holy Spirit,
in our coming and in our leaving,
in our loving and in our honouring,
in our unity and in our division,
walk amongst us and bless us.

Amen

A PRAYER

At the breaking of the new day,
framed in the chorus of the birds,
and refreshed in the dew on the fields,
we turn to you, O Christ.

In the ebb and flow of the morning,
where time and energy are spent
in busyness of mind and body,
we turn to you, O Christ.

At our midday pause,
where food sustains us
and drink refreshes us,
we turn to you, O Christ.

At the conclusion of the afternoon
we reflect on hopes fulfilled
and those pocketed for tomorrow.
We turn to you, O Christ.

In the evening rest
we give thanks for this day
and for all You have gracious provided.
We turn to you, O Christ.

Amen

COVID-19: A child's-eye view

Erin is seven years old and lives in Wellesbourne, Warwickshire. She enjoys watching television, singing and dancing. Erin is a member of Playbox Theatre and loves going to their workshops. Just four weeks ago, Erin became the proud owner of a kitten called Albus. Since getting Albus, most of her time is spent giving him cuddles or being chased around the lounge as he tries to bite her feet! She also likes spending time scootering in the park or lying on the hammock!



It's been weird not going to church, but we've been doing these virtual church services. The good part is that children have been able to join in: I've read a lesson and a prayer. Lots of us from around Wellesbourne have been able to take part and it's really good fun. We all do our sections and then they get edited together for the service. We now have the words on the screen for the songs, so we can join in at home. I watched the last service at Nan and Grandad's house. I missed them the most during lockdown and it is great to be able to have a hug and stay over at theirs now. I told everyone at church about me being able to stay over with them before I read my prayer. It was such good news!

I have missed seeing the people from church and I have missed singing and dancing with my friends. When this is all over, I am going to join a choir. Reverend Barry says that he is going to start a choir that is suitable for my age, so I hope that will work out.

During lockdown, I enjoyed walking with my dad in the sunshine and getting up late as I didn't have to go to school. I've probably seen more of the countryside around me since lockdown, as me and my dad did some mystery trips and walks. I've discovered Dover's Hill and it's really nice. It's only about twenty minutes from Wellesbourne. When we first went there it was really quiet but now it is way too busy. I've also got better and better at bike riding and scootering and I've got some new moves that are really good.

I haven't seen many people due to COVID-19. We didn't go into Stratford-on-Avon like we used to; we only went as far as the local supermarkets and I never went in. Dad and I would wait in the car while Mum did the shopping, but it got us out of the house on rainy days. My mum works for the NHS and has been working from home. It was really hard having her home but not being able to hug her whenever I wanted to. I did sneak in occasionally and I think I have probably met most of the people she works with!

School has been really good because our school has been using this thing called 'virtual classrooms'. It's really good because they set things up and you can show the teachers what you have done. But I'm really looking forward to going back to school in September. I will be in year three and that means I can go on the big playground and I can't wait to see my friends! ”



One small village church rises to the challenge

With a population of around 700, Yelvertoft in Northamptonshire is somewhat off the beaten track. But local Christians rose to the challenges of the national COVID-19 lockdown and in doing so discovered new approaches to mission and ministry.

Like church communities across the UK, the independent Congregational Chapel in the centre of Yelvertoft had to respond quickly to the closure of church buildings. Prior to taking up the leadership of the chapel, I had worked in an international management role, and was used to using video conferencing for business meetings. I decided – after brief and supportive discussions with chapel members – to move quickly to running a service on Zoom on Sunday 22 March, the day before lockdown was formally announced.

There were already a few people in the village offering their help to sick and isolated people so, in conversation with a respiratory specialist doctor living locally, we came together to form a COVID-19 support group for the village. We published details on the chapel website and, very quickly, we were able to offer a helpline staffed by two people who were self-isolating – who were pleased to be able to help in this way – supported by other volunteers.

The day before our first Zoom Service, my wife, Jan, and I produced an information leaflet and distributed it to every house in the village. It gave details of the support group, a request for more volunteers and details of how to join our Sunday service on Zoom the following day.

The chapel bought basic Android tablets for two of our regular congregation of about fifteen people and we supported members of the congregation who needed a little help to connect to Zoom.

Following the flyer drop, about 30 people volunteered to help with the local support group, and 27 households connected to our first Zoom service which included hymns and songs from YouTube and was led by my wife and me. The congregation included those from our regular congregation, members of our local parish church, and a number of people who would not normally attend church.

Feedback from the service was encouraging and a pattern was set. From the second week we were able to produce our own worship music videos using the cameras on our phones, which we edited, adding the words so that people could sing along. Various people from both churches have taken part, reading scriptures, leading prayers and introducing hymns. It has been a special joy to find older people happy to take part; one Sunday morning we had two 87-year-old ladies participating live in this way.

Our Sunday online congregation has settled at around 40 people, all with local village connections. We have also run two midweek courses using The

As Christians, we place our hope in God through Jesus, who by the power of his Spirit encourages and enables us to keep calm and carry on! This has certainly been the case in Yelvertoft, where we have seen a coming together of our village churches in prayer and worship during the pandemic.

The vision of members of the local Chapel led to a response from the community, which, in turn, has led to a feeling of togetherness. During the pandemic, when so many could have felt isolated in lockdown, the churches have come together in worship and praise with the aid of modern technology in the safety of their homes.

Michael Larder,
Church Warden, All Saints' Parish Church.

Bible Course from the Bible Society and Discipleship Explored. All requests for practical support in the village have been met through the volunteer group who have joyfully collected shopping and prescriptions, walked dogs, and offered phone conversations.

We have a real sense that the Holy Spirit is moving upon us, drawing us closer to himself and to each other. We don't know what the future will look like, but we're trusting God to guide us all. God is answering our prayer for his Kingdom to come.

Jim Lyon
yelvertoftchurch.org.uk

THINKING INSIDE THE BAG!

Has there ever been a time when the phrase ‘God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform’ has had quite such a meaningful impact as during this strange time of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Upper Eden Food Bank (UEFB, upperedenfoodbank.org.uk) has, like everyone else, had to adapt to new ways of working during COVID-19. We are based at the Sands Methodist Church in Appleby and work with churches from across the denominations and with the community. We know that whatever happens God is in control, even if it feels rather mysterious to us! During the pandemic we have literally been trying to ‘think inside the bag’ as we feel God directs us to.

One amazing ‘wonder’ has been that so many more people have been involved with the food bank over the last few months. At the beginning of lockdown, many local organisations offered both financial and practical support, shopping for specific items that we were short of. People who found themselves unable to go shopping have donated money instead of food. Volunteers who had to step back during lockdown have been replaced with new people, and others who had been furloughed from their usual jobs were also happy to help wherever they could.

During a period when new working procedures had to be put in place, including quarantining donated food and maintaining social distance, all this extra help has been greatly appreciated.

Another ‘wonder’ has been the development of our work with other agencies, including Citizens Advice, the Trussell Trust, local resilience teams, Eden Council and Town Action Teams. Strong existing links with Penrith Salvation Army have continued alongside work with local Anglicans and those of other faiths. Working together is incredibly important and has been particularly valuable at this time.

In more recent weeks we have been in contact with local schools and headteachers to try and reach families who, for a variety of reasons, are now struggling to feed their children on weekdays. A significant number of families have taken up this offer of help.

We are continually on the lookout for non-food items to add to bags. We’ve included a letter explaining what UEFB is, and the love and care which comes with each bag. Some carefully chosen colouring booklets and felt tip pens have also been included on occasions. We know that God wants us to show His love and care to everyone.

Many of our normal working practices have changed as a result of lockdown, and we now provide food for a longer period of time after a single referral, and offer children’s lunch bags in addition to standard packs. Of course, all this requires extra helpers and it is great to see how God has provided for this.

Our area suffers from high levels of deprivation including fuel poverty, low wages and child deprivation, so it has also been wonderful to see how God has used our rural approach in contrast to the more normal central pick up location for collection. We use a low-profile delivery system where bags are collected from local collection points and delivered to individual households; we cover an area of over 400 square miles!

For the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, we will continue to serve our community through the food bank, and God will continue to work wonders as we endeavour to show His love and care in our rural setting.

The Upper Eden Food Bank team

upperedenfoodbank.org.uk

Feeding the 2000

We're all familiar with the idea of 'punching above your weight', but it's not a phrase that's often applied to churches and the impact they have on their local community.

So welcome to Wragby, Lincolnshire, with its population of approximately 2000 people. When lockdown hit, the village rallied round to respond to the very practical needs of its community and the results have been extraordinary.

The Methodist Church, with its catering kitchen, was the perfect location for a lunch club. Founded and led by a lady from the village, this initiative now belongs to the community and draws on the time and energy of volunteers from across the churches and the wider community. Since lockdown began, this lunch club has produced 590 meals on wheels, a huge shared undertaking. The club also caters for teatime, and a team of volunteer drivers deliver both the lunches and a tea menu of

sandwiches and cakes baked by those in the community.

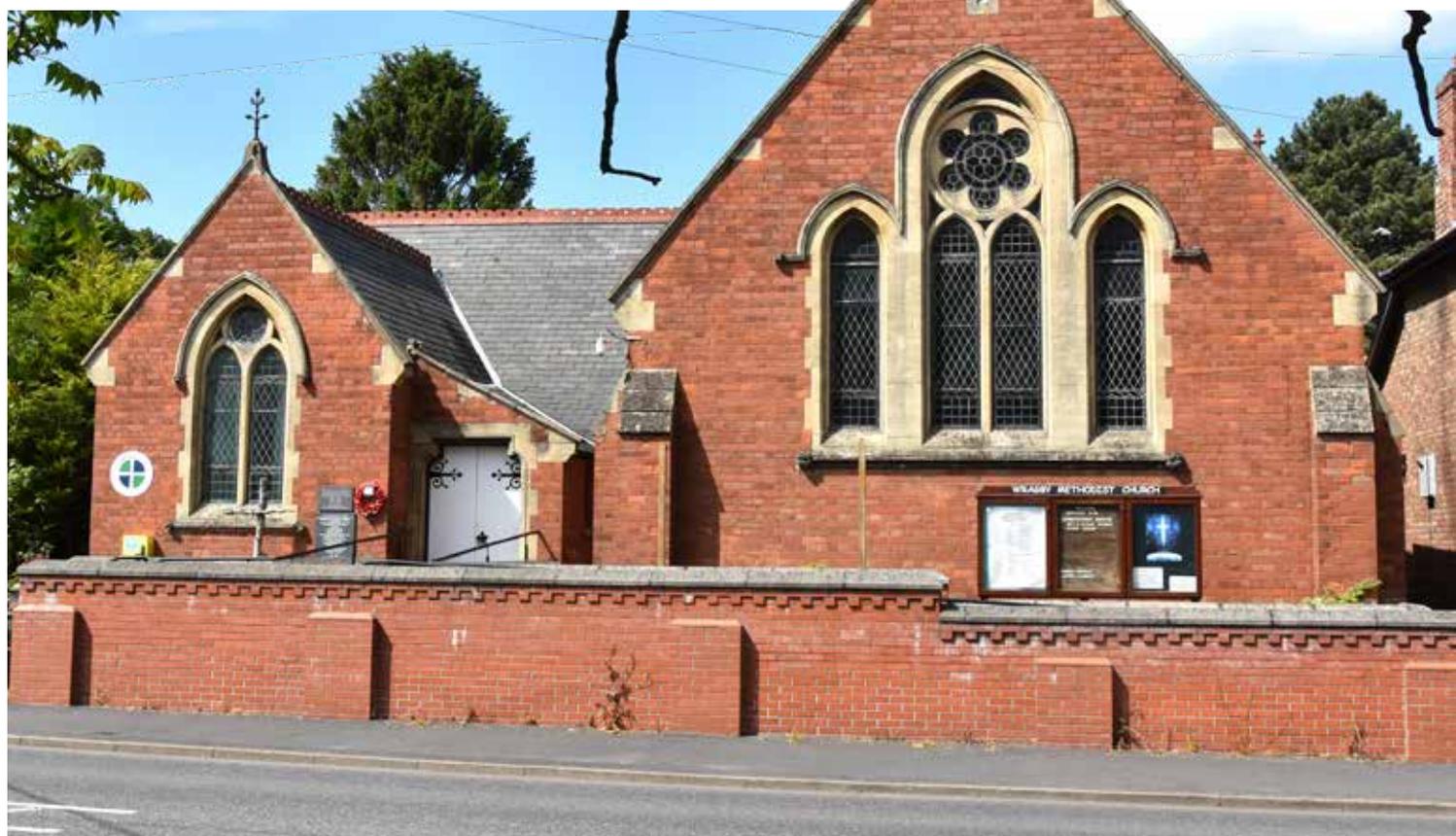
But this herculean catering effort doesn't end there! Aware that the provision of school meals is often a lifeline for families, volunteers have provided 2000 packed lunches for local school children during lockdown. The lunches – which also include those home-bake cakes – are prepared in the church and distributed from a central point in the village, initially the school and latterly the local sports hall.

Not content with the provision of meals, the village also hosts a food bank. While the food is stored in a local church, distribution is overseen by the local Young Farmers Club, and over a single ten-week period 75 food parcels, each containing enough food to feed a family of four, have been distributed to local residents. While most recipients come to collect their food parcels, in an emergency they can be delivered. As many running rural

food banks know only too well, the close-knit nature of communities, plus the stigma of needing to use a food bank, can be a barrier to accepting the support and help they offer; in Wragby, volunteers have been known to deliver parcels under cover of darkness to avoid embarrassment for the recipient.

Inevitably, this kind of generosity doesn't come cheap. The lunch club has received some funding, and local supermarkets donate to the food bank. However, without the financial generosity of those in the community it would be impossible for the project to continue with its work. This is a real community effort, driven by a desire to feed those most at risk during this incredibly challenging time.

**Revd Sue Wilkins and
Lawrie Lambert**



RURAL MISSION SUNDAY 2020

Heaven in Ordinary

The highlight of our summer is Rural Mission Sunday, an annual opportunity for rural churches to celebrate who they are, but this year's celebrations were turned on their head by COVID-19! Despite the significant challenges of celebrating 'together' without being able to meet, churches across the UK, and further afield, marked Rural Mission Sunday on 19 July and other Sundays across the summer. As ever, we've been inspired and encouraged by the stories that have been arriving in our inbox...

REVD ELEANOR SMITH, Staffordshire Moorlands Methodist Circuit

We've celebrated Rural Mission Sunday before, but usually as separate local churches; this year we celebrated as a circuit!

We produced a half-hour morning worship video which was uploaded to YouTube; most of the filming was done outside, taking in cows, sheep and countryside. We invited a farmer, a member of one of our congregations, to talk about how his faith has been shaped by farming. Those who watched the service found it very moving and holding the service outside felt more meaningful than holding services in church buildings.

We'll certainly take part in Rural Mission Sunday again, and now we've brought it to the attention of the whole circuit it will be easier next year to get other individual churches on board.

You can watch the video on YouTube at youtu.be/i2iS1zDEBIY

CAROL COLEMAN, St Catherine's, Littleton, Hampshire

We have never marked Rural Mission Sunday before, but I was looking for ideas for our online Cafe Church service on 19 July and a colleague alerted me to the Rural Mission Sunday material in Country Way. I used the material to produce an online service, and our Rector preached while members of the congregation read Exodus 3:1-6 and Malcolm Guite's poem Heaven in Ordinary.

The style of the material seemed to suit our Cafe Church, which is not tied to the Lectionary like other services, and we'd certainly encourage other churches to give Rural Mission Sunday a go!

REVD HERMIONE MORRIS, Tanat Vyrnwy Mission Area, Wales

For the last few years, church communities in the Tanat Vyrnwy Mission Area, North Powys, have celebrated Rural Mission Sunday. But this year's celebrations looked very different to those we've shared previously, as we continue to be 'together apart', praying and worshipping in our own homes.

Using the material provided by the Arthur Rank Centre, a 'postcard' was designed and sent out to church congregations via post or email and shared on our Mission Area Facebook page. The postcard encouraged people to celebrate the good in our rural churches and communities, especially all that's come to the fore during the pandemic lockdown. We drew on the story of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6) and reflected on where we've seen and encountered God in our everyday lives.

A Facebook post shared a couple of days before Rural Mission Sunday gave people a 'heads-up' and time to prepare, and the Mission Area's Sunday worship on Facebook on the day itself included prayers for rural communities throughout the world.

It was a very different way of marking Rural Mission Sunday, yet still a meaningful celebration of rural and agricultural life in God's world.



**REVD CLIVE FAIRCLOUGH
AND ROB WALROND,
Agricultural Chaplains, Somerset**

The focus of our Rural Mission Sunday celebrations was a video, created by members of the Agricultural Chaplains Association in Dorset and then circulated through our networks. The seed of the idea to put together a series of short reflections came from a Zoom meeting of Agricultural Chaplains that serve across Somerset and areas of Dorset and Devon. We were looking at ways in which we could communicate with our rural communities at a time when we were all missing our regular face-to-face contact, either at market or in our daily work.

Like all seeds, the project needed watering and the result was a diverse collection of theological reflections, set in a variety of rural contexts. Through the video we explored the Rural Mission Sunday theme of 'Heaven in Ordinary', the idea that as we look deeper into the 'ordinary' that surrounds us, we are able to appreciate more fully the sheer wonder of God, his creation and his care.

We're very grateful to the Communications team at the Diocese of Bath and Wells who edited the video together!

You can watch the video on YouTube at youtu.be/ikKOprzT0z4.

**REVD CAROLINE HEWLETT,
Vicar of Swaledale with Arkengarthdale, Yorkshire**

For reasons to do with rural broadband, and to give access to the widest group of people, we have not gone online for services in Swaledale and Arkengarthdale during lockdown. Our shared worship has been through a weekly newsletter which is emailed round on a Saturday night. It includes a Service of the Word and an invitation to light a candle at 10am on Sunday, and to use the material to worship with others around the parish from our own homes. This has been well received, with people saying, 'it is a real spiritual moment at home', and 'we love to think that we are sharing in prayer and worship with others around the parish at the same time.'

For the past few years, we have marked Rural Mission Sunday in all our services on that day, and in the past we have welcomed speakers from the Arthur Rank Centre too. This time, we used the Rural Mission Sunday material in a different way. We used the banner at the top of our newsletter, and the reflection, prayers and readings were taken from the material provided. This was a good way to have a different sort of service to mark a special Sunday, and the feedback was good.

Rural Mission Sunday links us with the Arthur Rank Centre and reminds us that we are part of a wide network of small rural churches, praying, worshipping and serving their communities through different seasons, including this unexpected time of COVID-19 in which we find ourselves.

YOUR FEEDBACK...

Did you take part in Rural Mission Sunday but haven't quite got round to sending us your feedback yet? There's still time! Go to the feedback form on our website (arthurrankcentre.org.uk/rms-2020-feedback) where you can tell us about your event.

**SAVE THE DATE!
Sunday 18 July 2021**

Rural Mission Sunday 2021 will take place on **Sunday 18 July** and resources will be available by Easter. Get the date in your diary now and start preparing to celebrate your rural church and community in 2021!



We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Growing compassionate rural communities

Compassion seems to be the buzz word these days, but do we really understand what it is and why we need it in today's world? What does it look like?

My personal conviction and understanding is that a community marked by compassion seeks to include the vulnerable and marginalised, and works towards the integration of diverse groups and peoples.

What is the origin of the word 'compassion'? In Latin, *compati* means to 'suffer with', or to identify with someone else's suffering. It is interesting to look at some biblical texts that refer to compassion in the ministry and life of Jesus. Matthew 14 tells the story of two blind men sitting by a roadside; Jesus speaks to them and asks what they want. When the men explain that 'we want our sight', we hear that 'Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him' (Matthew 14:13-14).

A little later in the same gospel, Jesus encounters a widow accompanying the body of her only son. This time, Matthew says that when Jesus saw her, 'his heart went out to her' and his compassionate

response resulted in her son being raised from the dead (Matthew 20:30-34).

There are a number of observations you can make from these two descriptions of Christ's compassion. Firstly, Jesus is responding to clearly identified need and is moved by compassion to meet it. The need is acknowledged by Jesus and he responds to their calls for help. But these encounters also take place with people on the edges of the community, rejected and stigmatised.

These key principles underpin the vision and mission of Growing Compassionate Communities (growingcompassion.org.uk): we seek to promote inclusiveness to all peoples and groups, in order to reduce loneliness and isolation and challenge stigma.

We are encouraged by the way that our commitment to compassion is being perceived by those we reach out to in our local community:

'I would like to add how much we

enjoyed being part of the group. There was a tremendous sense of love in that hall that day and all the folks were really enjoying themselves. You are certainly doing a tremendous work in the neighbourhood for the vulnerable and their carers, and such a welcome is evident.'

True compassion changes the way we live and how we view pain and distress.

Peter Jones

Pioneer Minister
Chair, Growing Compassionate
Communities.

growingcompassion.org.uk
peterjonescipn@outlook.com

You can find out more about Growing Compassionate Communities in Peter's book, *Growing a Compassionate Community: A model for action* (2019).



Celebrating Christmas chaos!

My name is Sallie and I'm a retired primary school teacher and a lay preacher in our parish, part of a rural community on the west side of the Isle of Wight. Back in November 2019, Revd Leisa Potter, our vicar, asked me to organise the Crib Service held in my church, All Saints, on Christmas Eve. Being a retired teacher, this was not a daunting exercise for me as I had organised many school nativity plays.

Leisa and I decided we would do a 'scratch' nativity, pulling the play together on the day with whoever turned up to get involved. We put an advert in the church magazine inviting everyone to come along in costume or everyday clothes. Additional costumes were provided by our Open the Book group, and we recruited adults willing to take responsibility for specific groups of characters – Marys, sheep, angels etc. – and help them to their correct place at the correct time.

The plan was for a traditional retelling of the Nativity with fun actions and a mixture of well-known carols and fun songs. Leisa was the narrator and I acted as director, making sure everyone was in the right place at the right time.



Christmas Eve arrived. The church was ready – furniture moved, pianist in position, tubs of chocolate by the door to give to everyone as they left – and we waited.

As time ticked by, we accumulated a Mary and a wise man (my grandchildren) and lots of adult leaders but where was everyone else? 4pm was fast approaching... and then suddenly the church was full!

Yes, at some points it did seem like bedlam! Stage fright amongst some of the younger children meant we thought we'd lose a few characters, but then a group of visiting teenagers stepped up to the mark and were brilliant! A lovely little toddler thought that the straw shouldn't stay in the manger but be scattered all around the church. The only donkey we

had really didn't want to take part, and the shepherd's crook managed to pull the mains lead from the piano in the middle of a song!

But none of this mattered because our church was alive, full of people of every age having fun and embracing the true message of Christmas.

Everyone went home happily munching their chocolates, ready to embrace the busy days that were to follow.

And the straw all over the floor? Well, luckily my grandson loves hoovering so that was easily remedied, and everyone helped to put the furniture back ready for Midnight Mass. It had been a truly uplifting experience!

Sallie Boulter





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