

Life and faith in rural Britain...

COUNTRYWAY



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)

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, Antrobus

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

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

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