

# Response to Life-Giving Questions – Final Report

## Introduction

The Vicar, Mark, gave a presentation in June 2020. He included a poem by Philip Larkin 'Church Going' and added some key scriptures and key principles before asking the group to think about these and pray about them. Key thoughts and key resources were also provided.

The whole parish was asked to respond in writing and Mark's PA, Yolanda, collated the response and removed the names of the contributors.

Wendy Carr, Andy Page and Les Naylor performed the first trawl of the responses and identified some key themes. Mike Talbot was invited to produce an overview of the responses as he worked on the analysis of consultations in a professional capacity. A larger team was then put together to assess the results and to formulate a way forward. The four above were joined by Melissa Lavin, Vienna Francis, Felicity Layton, Valerie Lamb, James Brown and David Metcalf.

## The Response

The response was excellent. Over 60 replies came in mostly from individuals and some for couples. They covered more than 80 pages. The responses contained answers to the following questions:

- What have the last few months shown us about our own identity as individuals and as a church?
- What is God awaking in you because of all that has happened? (Some said Covid-19 might be a wakeup call)
- What shape of local church would help you better express these hopes?
- What relationships with our community need to be strengthened?
- What has God been saying to you that you feel able to express and share with others?

## The Collation and Ordering

The initial work of sifting through all the responses identified six themes:

- Gathered Worship
- What is Church?
- Community
- National and Global Issues
- Fellowship
- Self-Awareness and Life Balance

Each team member asked to look at one theme and consider it in terms of the following questions:

- a) What are we doing well?
- b) What should we stop doing / steer clear of?
- c) What can we improve / develop a little
- d) What requires a radical re-think or a different approach

## The Results

The results of the team's deliberations gave a general sense of the key messages being put forward in the response. The team then identified the actions which were already underway or being planned, and the others which we should look at in the medium term. These are presented in a tabular form below. The ones which are underway are highlighted in pale yellow

## Overall Conclusions

The results clearly show that not only are people in the parish interested in services, fellowship and self-awareness, but that there is huge desire to serve the community. This is shown by the volume of responses on things like 'faith in action', care for various cohorts, and getting together with other local churches and agencies to make a real difference to the lives of those who need support in North Tonbridge.

Many respondents appreciated the way that the church had risen to the challenge of the COVID-19 restrictions and many, too, said how their faith has helped them through these difficult times.

The results also showed that the enforced pause in "normal" life caused by the pandemic led to reflections for many, including: about what was important, such as spending time with God, and the fellowship and support of home (and other) groups; that technology can help church activities carry on but also makes it possible to do things differently, and not just during the pandemic; that we should look afresh at how we best use our resources across the parish; that good communications within the church and to the community are essential if these ideas are to be turned into practice.

The results have therefore been present in three sections:

**A: Looking Inwards or 'Looking at Ourselves'** – areas like Gathered Worship, Fellowship, Self-Awareness and Life Balance

**B: Looking Outwards** – Community Action, Pastoral Care, National and Global Issues

**C: Common Themes** - The General and 'What is Church?' themes address issues which crossover or combine elements from both the other two sections.

The main conclusion is that the parish does have a vision of itself as not just an organisation with a common faith which meets together for worship and fellowship, but one which also wants to tackle inequality and injustice, support the poor, the isolated and the infirm, and make a real difference to the lives of local people. It is only by showing how we put our faith into action do we hope to attract new people and build the church.

As a parish, we are often accused of 'looking after ourselves', and having no real value to the society outside, but the loud and clear cry from the responses is that **we do** care, **we do** want to see faith in action, and **we do** want to tackle inequality and injustice.

Therefore, this begs the question whether we can allocate our clergy, admin time and money in this way. We could review all that we do in the parish, and moreover all that we spend, and potentially split it 50/50.

Could we allocate half our resources to:

- Worship and services
- Meeting and feeding the sheep
- Supporting those in the congregations

And the other half allocate to:

- Community action
- Care and support
- Life Events – marriages, funerals and baptisms
- Running groups for, or otherwise supporting the cohorts we identified in the responses – the children, the young, the unemployed, the self-employed, families, the elderly, those suffering from mental health problems, the lonely and the isolated?

As one response included Justin Welby's comment – 'We should not go back to where we were'!