

Life-Giving Questions for a Life-Giving Church

Summary of Responses and Work to Date

Les Naylor, 7th Dec 2020.

1. Introduction

Mark gave a presentation to all church leaders in June this year. He presented a poem by Philip Larkin 'Church Going' and then 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.

An initial team of Wendy Carr, Andy Page and I performed the first trawl of the responses and identified some key themes. Mike Talbot was then invited to produce an overview of the responses in that he works in the field of data analysis 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.

This paper summarises the work to date.

2. 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?

3. The Collation and Ordering

The initial work by Wendy, Andy and Les identified six themes into which most of the responses fell:

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

The rest of the full team were then asked to each take 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

In order to better focus the team's thoughts, Wendy added notes on what initiatives are ongoing or being looked at, and also to consider what we can do now under COVID-19 restrictions, and what will need to wait for those restrictions to be lifted.

4. Summary of the Results

General

This project has highlighted the need for improved communication in the parish, and to better co-ordinate the work we are doing to eliminate any duplication and to better focus efforts being made by individual churches.

In the medium term we should consider having a Communications Manager to set up, develop and support our streams of communication – on-line, social media, magazine, notices, handouts, press, radio etc.

Gathered Worship

The majority support the provision of on-line services. These have been a lifeline and will be even after the C-19 restrictions are lifted.

For the physical services there was much about 4 churches and 7 services per week. Perhaps gathered worship should develop along lines not simply of church attendance, but of creating a community working together. The future of the 4 churches model will need to be decided in the medium / long term.

Community

Much good work is already taking place. Areas to continue to develop include Pastoral work in care homes, hospitals and with those in grief, the Coffee Bar at P&P, Open House, Links with Schools, Teddies and Tiny Acorns, and the Uniformed Groups

Medium to long term – develop and build relationships with other local churches and community support groups, rather than starting new ones. Show the local community that we are here and committed to it.

The effort made to create the contact database and the volunteers that make the calls should be kept and developed. It can provide the backbone for a pastoral support system which helps us continue to look after the elderly, the vulnerable and the lonely both during the C-19 crisis and after.

Self-Awareness and Life Balance

Ensure we take time out for prayer and meditation – seen as essential for spiritual growth and wellbeing. Lots of feedback on improved prayer during lockdown, and the need to seek God's guidance, for the Holy Spirit to come and strengthen us, and the need for repentance.

Improved co-ordination and limiting the number of initiatives we pursue will enable those 'busy bees' to give more time to fewer, better-targeted aims.

Fellowship

Many commented on the support they have received from their homegroup. The homegroups, prayer groups and others play a key role in maintaining communications, support and friendships, particularly when unable to meet together physically.

Issues – Local and National and What is Church?

The responses from these two topics are still being worked on.

5. The Next Steps

The group will not meet again until the new year. During that period the members of the team will further consider their themes and the overall topic.

In January we will complete the collation of the analysis of each theme and develop plans for:

- a) The next few months, while under C-19 restrictions
- b) Short term plans for 2021 which will continue after C-19 restrictions are lifted.
- c) Medium term plans (over say 2-3 years) which can be started in 2021
- d) Longer term strategic plans which will require the buy-in of many from within the parish and perhaps beyond which will require much thought, prayer, assessment and planning.

All feel that the crisis, and now the interregnum, gives us the opportunity to pause, reflect and consider the future of the parish, what God has in mind for us, and how we can best meet the spiritual and physical needs of the people of North Tonbridge. It is an opportunity we must grasp and pursue.