

## **Diocese of St Albans**

### **Discussion Paper for the Joint Meeting of the Bishop's Council and the DBF 18th January 2021**

#### ***Living God's Love so that God's Kingdom might grow in the world***

This paper has been written to stimulate a discussion on the short and medium term challenges and opportunities which face us, both for traditional church and Reaching New People.

#### **Covid-19 and its aftermath**

The UK Coronavirus lockdown has caused the greatest disruption to normal life since the Second World War:

- Commuting to work has collapsed and home working has increased.
- A minority have lost their jobs.
- Shopping had moved online; many high street shops are likely to close.
- Social and sporting activities have stopped.
- Many local communities have been rebooted as neighbours have helped one another.
- Schools have been closed, offering online education. Children in poorer areas are likely to have been adversely affected the most.
- The NHS continues to be under immense pressure, and this will continue after COVID-19 because so many screening programmes for other conditions have been delayed.
- Charities have been needed more than ever but many are facing a funding crisis.
- Access to computers and broadband have become essential for many aspects of life and education, yet many people are excluded.

**Churches and church schools** have faced their own set of opportunities and challenges:

- Normal patterns of churchgoing have been totally disrupted although many have managed to provide online worship. Others are still struggling.
- During the periods when congregations have been back in church, it is mainly the elderly people who are attending (and who perhaps should be shielding). The attendance of children, youth and young families has almost collapsed, as have the number of confirmations. The position of fresh expressions of church is not clear.
- Church finances have held up in the wealthier parishes and those which have a long tradition of planned giving. Those churches which rely on cash collections, hall rental income and fund-raising activities have been hit worse. There is a possibility that a few of our very tiny congregations may no longer be financially viable.
- Practical responses to parish needs have been patchy, with some wonderful examples of food banks and phone networks. However, in some churches it has been hard to know what has been organised to reach out to people in the community.
- Our church schools are on the front line, but heads and teachers are exhausted and some children's education has been adversely affected.

### **A Kairos moment**

The old adage 'never waste a crisis' is pertinent for our current situation. As vaccinations increase and the weather warms it is likely the level of COVID-19 will decrease and restrictions will be slowly lifted. Many people have lost the habit of going to the gym, pub, football match or golf course and all of those organizations will be developing advertising strategies to attract people back; they will be jostling for people's time, money and loyalty. The danger is that when congregations are allowed back to worship as normal, they may want to focus on their friends and not be so open to newcomers or to future changes. We need to be ready to grasp the opportunities as and when they arrive. I suspect that in many parts of society there will be an openness and a welcome to anyone who is willing to give an intelligent, humble lead in their community as we move into the future. If we and our clergy and lay leaders do not give a lead, others will. How will the distinctive Christian voice be heard and our contribution be made?

### **Question to central diocesan structures, Bishop's Council, DBF:**

- In the light of the changes, challenges and opportunities set out above, what should be our priorities in response and why?
- As a diocese and in our parishes, how can we best give an intelligent, humble lead in our communities as we move into the future?
- As a diocese and in our parishes, how can we ensure a distinctive Christian voice is heard and our contribution made?

**Questions to parishes:**

- In your church and community, where and how do you see the values of God's kingdom of love, justice and mercy most in evidence?
- In your church and community, where and how do you see the values of God's kingdom most lacking?
- What are the needs of my area/parish?
- What does it require for us to be 'at the centre' of our community and a resource for others?
- Who might we work with as partners? Who do we need to talk with/continue to talk with (e.g., local councillors; voluntary groups; local networks; etc)? Is it possible to tap into the large number of those who were volunteering early on in the pandemic?
- How do we meet the need for community events this summer such as memorials for those who have died/celebrations/Back to Church Sunday?
- How can we support our heads, teachers and schools (including community schools and academies), not least as we need to restart our children's and youth work?
- Where do we look biblically and theologically to resource our mission and outreach to our community?

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