

On the vine

A lay minister's reflection on how Church is changing

Sarah Musgrave is a Licence Lay Minister in Marlborough, and is also a psychotherapist. She spoke at a recent meeting of Rural Deans and Lay Chairs from across the Diocese.

The current situation holds up a mirror to our church; how we serve the community and how the church needs to adapt. While our need for God won't change, how we enable our community to follow Jesus, will.

I was asked to address:

What aspects of our churches' future have been brought into the present by the current crisis?

Well, the present situation has been exacerbated by coronavirus.

Our older church members contribute generously with time, money, organisation, filling the rotas, their presence etc. If their absence continues through shielding or death, there will be gaps in each of these areas. Younger people will have to step up, rather than deferring to older parishioners, which is a good thing.

We're moving online, which is a vital part of the way forward, but there are implications.

Firstly, for worship and ministry: with no public worship and no pastoral visiting to homes, there is naturally less personal contact between the priest or licensed lay minister and each parishioner.

There are the societal implications for church as well. There has been significant loss and huge grief within our communities – loss of old way of being, loss through death and ill health, loss of contact, loss of old structure, loss of physical contact, loss of friendships. There is also the isolation. Isolation of those without access to computers or transport, isolation due to poverty or homelessness and the isolation of people trapped in domestic violence and abuse or poor relationships. While the fear and reality of unemployment is also increasing the divide between those who have and those who haven't.

There are also the financial implications for our churches. We are seeing church income dropping as fewer people attend communal worship, those who contribute weekly won't have contributed, and other people won't be able to give as much, if their own finances have reduced.

We know that stipendiary clergy are expensive to train, house, pay and pension. So do we need to ask difficult questions such as – Are there too many or too few priests to support the illusion of having a viable clergy presence in every community? - Is the primary task of clergy going to be to manage the laity who will then do the "priestly" work?

But throughout this there are opportunities.

There's a new spirit of community – people talking to strangers, people offering to support neighbours. Something's going on – could it be the Holy Spirit?

Our online contact means our services can reach a wider audience and we are now a church that is "available on demand". Our church is seen in our communities as responding to present crisis. The graveside funerals, along with the memorial services, that we will be able to hold after Lockdown, can speak into the trauma and offer hope. Meanwhile, ministry has become much more creative.

Will 'normal' have changed and what might remain & what might default back afterwards?

Yes, normal will have changed but many will want old 'pre-corona' patterns to return – same service patterns, same contact with priest, everything personal.

I think we need to remain with some of the new format, the new learning that works.

Services will continue online. Why? Because they can reach a wider audience. They are available on demand and families can spend time together at sport and time together in worship, at a time that suits. People of all ages are becoming more computer-literate – Skype, Zoom, Teams, FaceTime etc – so we can still reach many in our traditional congregations this way. The new normal could see us start to live stream all services to reach those who are house bound, in hospital, residential homes, away and in schools etc. I think the new normal will also mean less emphasis on buildings, more on people.

As I said, Ministry is getting more creative. We have found more creative ways of connecting mid-week – we have daily blogs, phone calls, texts, Skype, letters to everyone in the parish each week. And through all of this we are encouraging 'good neighbours' and encouraging greater contact with priests and LLMs.

We have had to be more creative with the ways we offer Sunday worshipping, online. There are now audio and visual services that can be joined at times that suit parishioners, therefore not affected by Sunday sport etc.

There is greater creativity in pastoral and bereavement ministry – iPads in residential homes are allowing us to pray with the dying, orders of services are sent out to all those who would have attended a funeral service, enabling time for 'being with' mourners during the service; and praying with real integrity by phone can really meet some deep needs. We have also found more creative ways of sharing faith/ hope, through praying separately but at the same time, too.

So I don't want us to default back to pre-corona, as there are a whole range of new things that are too important to lose.

However, those who can, will want to worship as a congregation. We will still want to gather together for the Eucharist. We will want to offer pastoral care through home visits and Holy Communion to individuals and residential homes. We will want to bring our children's services back into church. Believers still need church for group fellowship and prayer, to talk about their spiritual needs and concerns. We will want to sing and pray together again in our sacred spaces.

And what will never change – although the way of offering them may – is our meaning and purpose as Christians, the need for God, our desire to worship, our mission to share the Gospel and prayer. So, we will keep the importance of the church as a community of believers and our ministry to support the bereaved, baptisms, our need to attend funerals, to be alongside the dying, to worship together, to see each other, our need for healing, prayer, and deeper connection with Jesus.

While normal service is suspended and we are viewing things differently, what might we foresee for the church of 2030?

Technology will play an increasing role and in more areas of our lives and so the Church, as it is, does need to change. As the world develops, the church needs to develop, too. We need to hold onto our mission, but not hold on to the present model.

Jesus gave us a new commandment to love one another as he loves us (John 13:34-35). Let's do it. Let's live our faith and rather than just joining for worship each week, let's join to live the Christian life. "By this everyone will know that we are disciples, if we have love for one another."

So, how might we live our faith in a way that is caring, inclusive and visible?

'Church' will have become a collective noun – the word for a collection of Christians – and no longer a place (think herd, flock). We will 'live the Christian life' rather than 'go to a church building'. We will still gather for worship, but most services will be online (Zoom etc), with opportunity for conversation afterwards – both midweek and Sunday evenings or whenever one wants to 'catch up'.

The format of worship may change, it could be shorter/ longer, but with a daily top-up available and differing provision for differing age groups. A variety of people would contribute without the need to leave their homes – better for some who find getting to church difficult. Sunday mornings could be left free for sport and family time or time for personal spiritual reflection and community projects. A bonus of virtual church is that people see each other's faces, rather than looking at the back of the people in front.

Morning and Evening Prayer can be zoomed, so that means parishioners could join in and also chat afterwards. It would allow community prayer requests and be more pastorally focussed. Small groups could run online and in person, to support those at home, in hospital, and in care homes. There could be prayer rooms online: places to visit for care, sanctuary, compassion (in a similar way to prayer rooms in hospitals). Wisdom and spiritual depth of the older Christians in our communities would be valued, and ways found to express this.

Jesus valued everyone as individuals. The 'church community' would support everyone to become able to 'attend' groups and worship – through providing access to computers and offering training and ongoing support.

Christianity would become more 'relevant', speaking into our lived experience.

Our need for community would be met by coming together in social action or community social events, as well as worship. Parish churches could become 'Christian Community Hubs (CCH)' for midweek contact, as centres for socials, debt advice, talks re domestic violence, drop-ins, workshops on the environment, groups for the unemployed with skills workshops, children's after school clubs to share the concerns that they hold, computing workshops, bereavement groups etc.

Youth workers/ families could offer online learning and community for children and young people, with a local community bus as the focus for contact and connection, bringing them to a CCH or church building. I believe by 2030 Children and Young People will be valued for their (greater?) understanding on injustice, the environment and inequality. They will contribute by speaking into the adult world and maybe leading workshops.

I see priests and LLMs working collaboratively, each using their own gifts towards the coming of the Kingdom, meetings going more online, becoming shorter and task-focussed, and could relate to a wide community of people.

As for our church buildings, some would be held onto as sacred spaces for spirituality, prayer, the Eucharist, contemplation. Some would become more linked to weekly activities than for Sunday worship, so parishioners would gradually start to visit other churches.

This model would meet the need for fewer priests, while offering more time for prayer and spiritual development. Ministry could become more visible through our online work and it also could reach a wider group than regulars who used to attend services, and at times that suits.

If we pray and we've got a plan, money will come and old debts will be written off. People give to a plan, rather than a deficit - with membership comes money. Maybe, through all of this, we could experience the joy of seeing God's kingdom become more and more apparent around us.

So we should certainly **'seize the day'** and start making changes now. Let's hold onto the spirit of generosity – financial, practical and spiritual – that is all around us. Let's encourage this in our own communities. Let's work towards a new norm that encompasses thoughtfulness, care, and living a Christian life that is visible to all.

Sarah Musgrave