

Rectors Report: Easter Vestry 2021. Living as the Church in Changing times

It has become a cliché to say that we are now ministering in a new reality. We have had to adjust to living with Covid-19; masks have become normative, and the smell of hand sanitizer has become all too familiar. We are all now tasked with imagining what a post Covid landscape might look like.

The Archbishop of Canterbury drew our thoughts recently to words observed by the theologian Hans Kung: “To stay the same when everything else around you changes, is not to stay the same”.

The Church of Ireland has been a bedrock of faith, love, hope and compassion in this country for centuries through conflict, plagues, and pandemics - we still are, and we will go on being just that. We will have to change and adapt, but we have done this before, and we will do it again. The very reason the Church of Ireland has survived and flourished over centuries is because ministry has evolved. We call it living incarnationally. The church does not live outside of the world, or parallel to it. We live in the world, incarnate, in the messiness of time and reality.

During Eastertide we read the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the early church. The church then was fluid, adaptable and dynamic. It both responded, adjusted and in doing so it led. It set the foundations of a movement that would change the world. Likewise, in the power of the Spirit, it is important that we respond, adapt, and lead.

In Kilternan, we made the decision early in this pandemic, that we would not simply sit back and wait for our troubles to blow over, but we would act and adapt to meet the needs emerging using whatever tools were at our disposal. I am proud of the work that we have done over the last year, not just in how we have engaged with technology, but in how we have safely facilitated ‘in person’ and face to face engagement within the parameters of our restrictions.

In the previous year we have uploaded 95 videos onto YouTube, including a weekly service with regularly hundreds of viewers. I still get comments and encouraging feedback from people who I would never have seen in church. As well as meeting the spiritual needs of our regular worshipers, our YouTube services have enabled us to minister to and reach people who may be dechurched or unchurched. A particular word of thanks goes to Kevin O’Sullivan who has risen to the technological challenges of our age with enthusiasm. I might also recognise the work of the choirs who have responded exceptionally to the virtual experience. If you have not already done so I might

encourage you to look at the recent Stainer's Crucifixion, a service born in Kiltiernan that has been viewed 3,400 times.

Since the pandemic began, we have run two bible / theology series on YouTube, a Pilgrim course on zoom and a zoom Marriage Course. We have a weekly gathering for prayer on zoom every Wednesday, with as many as 20 people gathered to pray. We run weekly youth groups on zoom, a weekly play café and a thriving monthly Messy Church with often 40 to 50 families in virtual attendance.

We also seek opportunities for safe in person engagement. We have run chalk walks for families, as well as Muddy Church QR trails. The Gathering Grounds when permitted to do so has been opened for takeaway, and we have opened the church for private prayer every Wednesday. One of the programmes we have been delighted to offer is a weekly soup run around some of our senior members who we do not get to see so regularly. Since November we have been delivering as many as 40 bowls of soup every week.

We have continued to support charitable organisations, notably CRiTiCall who work with women who have experienced domestic violence during Covid.

We have not sat still regarding our own fabric needs. Significant work has been done on the church tower and are grateful for the donations we received from parishioners, raising around €15,000. Just recently we have purchased a defibrillator for the Kiltiernan Centre thanks to a donation by a parishioner.

I am grateful for the work and support of the Select Vestry and the office holders of the church for everything they have done. I would like to offer my thanks to all the staff and worship team for everything that they do. Annemarie, Brian, Lynn, Kevin, Carol, Alistair, and Julie have been wonderful examples of leadership and adaptability in their areas of expertise. Once again, I want to thank each one of them for everything they have done in a year that has pushed us all to the edge of our personal capacity. I might mention Alistair here who came to the parish during the pandemic. I'm mindful that he will be leaving us in June. We have been blessed by his ministry and we will miss him when he goes, but he will go with our prayers and blessing.

Of course, there have been difficult things in the last year. My mind goes to funerals with sometimes no more than 6 people in attendance, of weddings cancelled, of people struggling with loneliness and physical and mental ill

health. We will continue to pray and to serve, as all of us live with the task of being a good neighbour.

I also want to recognise that Covid has brought significant financial struggles to the life of the parish, but we are not alone in this. Certainly one of the things we will need to do is to look hard at how we generate finance. I stand by the ministry that we offer as a church, and I truly believe that God's calling is for us to grow, but to do so we need to see our revenue increase. That is a piece of work for all of us as we move forward.

There is a sense that we have been living through history. As we move into a post Covid society, we will be looking once again at how we do ministry and mission. We will be looking at our own tri statement of building community, strengthening worship, and growing in service. What will be the same and what will be different? We have learned that we are perhaps more adaptable than we thought we were. We have learned that technology is a friend. We have learned that church can happen in lots of different shapes and sizes. We have learned that we need each other more than we thought, and that we should never take each other for granted. I hope we have learned to be more generous with each other.

Holy Spirit, lead us in the year ahead.