

Report on 2020 for the Annual General Meeting of St Columba's District

Looking back over my reports to the DCC during 2020 to remind myself of what we did, I am surprised by how ordinary things were in January, how rapidly it all changed, and seeing the helter skelter nature of the year set out as encountered without benefit of hindsight. It has been a strange year.

The year was in some ways bracketed by two shared services. Just at the turn of the year, we came together in a joyful shared service with St Aidan's to celebrate 75 years since we planted them, and also looked forward as we celebrated the anniversary of the planting by them of Church in the Park. We heard some of our shared history, with Edgar contributing his memories of those early days. Then, at a service at St Aidan's in December 2020, the Parish expressed its gratitude to Revd Peter Sinclair for his time as Interim Rector, and particularly for his energy and commitment during this year in which much of what we had all hoped to do had to be paused or radically reshaped.

From early March, Covid 19 dominated everything. In March we had had a series of emails from the Bishop and Archbishop with guidance on ways forward. There were to be no services in church. (This was of course before the first lockdown) but we were allowed to keep church open for private prayer. 15th March was the last Eucharist where most if not all of us were there. On Mothering Sunday (22nd March) we recorded a service of Holy Communion from Church. That was the last service to happen in church – and our last Eucharist till July.

We hastily looked at ways to connect with people in the congregation, and ways to help the community. We set up a WhatsApp Group for the DCC (which later expanded) and identified who was in contact with people on the Electoral Roll, mostly by phone. We found that between us there were only about 8 people with whom no-one was regularly in touch. During the year those who had suitable equipment became familiar with Zoom. We used this for DCC meetings, our AGM, and for social and fundraising events (including a Christian Aid film and discussion, and a Virtual Christmas Fair)

The Volunteer Coordinator with the Council had a phone contact for the church. We were part of setting up a phone number for community support, manned by volunteers (principally from St Aidans but also here) to offer phone based support and linking with groups at the local community centres to offer delivery of shopping etc as needed. Through this we also made more links with the local authority's Public Health team, and the social services community outreach team. The co-op and the corner shop, and the Spar all took leaflets and co-op and corner shop asked for more as they were actively encouraging people they felt were vulnerable to be in touch. That said, there were very few actual calls for help – about 12-15 over a month - and those mainly shopping related. More callers in the early weeks were offering to help with anything we needed. After about 6 weeks as the NHS volunteer scheme began and the various local authorities set up schemes, we saw a drop off of interest.

In January one of the things we had done was to get a mobile wifi hub. Little did we realise how enormously important that would turn out to be during this year. From March the team vastly expanded our technical skills and managed online services which until July were mostly from the vicarage (having got in at the deep end quite quickly with Holy Week last

year!) Meanwhile, all activities in the church and hall were cancelled, with an obvious loss of income resulting. We applied for funding through the local authority twice, without success despite a supportive letter from Bishop Christine (colleagues in Newcastle were getting money from an equivalent fund), but finally received a small grant through the authority from monies for voluntary sector organisations impacted by the closures. We received this at the turn of the year 20/21.

When we were first allowed back into church we undertook a brief survey to find out how we might best provide what people wanted. We undertook a thorough risk assessment, which has been updated at intervals throughout the subsequent months as guidance has changed. Similarly, we developed supplementary conditions of hire for the hall, increased hire charges, and began to pay for a regular professional clean each week (until lockdowns stopped this).

I had been appointed as a Governor at Greenfields CPS from 7 January. Early in lockdown one, Hazlewood made use of our community support number to arrange for help in delivering lunches. Both Greenfields and North Gosforth Academy expressed gratitude for our continuing interest/concern and prayers. Greenfields governors' meetings continued virtually, and in the summer I was involved in socially distanced in-person interviews for senior roles. At Christmas we collaborated with Greenfields on a very successful Nativity Trail, with installations hosted in congregation members gardens, and visited by many people.

The ATC stopped meeting in March and has continued as a virtual organisation, though it almost restarted in person in November. We marked Remembrance with a strictly limited act of remembrance at the War Memorial which was broadcast live and was our second most popular post on Facebook in 2020. I have stayed in touch by email with Mick Soulsby, the OC.

During the year we had one baptism. We had one wedding, in July, on the first day on which it was possible. Funerals continued throughout the year – though when they could take place in church this was much appreciated. During the year we had 17 (6 in church), including one for a member of the NE United in Christ fellowship.

Finally, I just want to place on record how grateful I am for the wonderful level of support advice and encouragement which I have received over the past year and more from Marjorie and Bill, as we have together grappled with a lot of completely novel challenges. I will say it again many times I'm sure, but they have been outstanding and gone many extra miles at least virtually!

Pauline Pearson
April 2021