

Pool MA response to Archdeacon Barry's Paper - Reconstruction – Phase One

How will your Mission Area and its churches rebuild once the covid pandemic begins to subside? Please use the following questions to guide your planning:

1 Learning from what has happened

a) What lessons have you learned as a result of the pandemic?

Having a variety of types of services (Zoom, Pre-recorded YouTube & In-Church services) has enabled us to reach more people and different groups (including shut-ins, carers and people living with dementia). They also provide a familiar anchor for people away from home.

The Zoom service has had a successful children's church using break out rooms in Zoom although Zoom Messy Church didn't work well. Therefore, the lack of Messy Church and also of in-school worship has hampered outreach in these areas.

Those not able to access on-line services have missed out and generally been much harder to support. Those normally receiving Communion at home have also been disadvantaged.

There has been some breaking down of barriers between churches within the MA, with people attending other churches if there was no service in 'their church' and also interactions in on-line services/meetings.

Some ministers felt closer to people through zoom worship than in in-church worship.

Some people thought zoom meetings create more thinking/reflection time.

a) What impact will those lessons have on your future practice?

The lengthy periods without regular in-church worship give us an opportunity to 're-set' - to let go of previous norms and consider doing things differently.

What we'd like to do when we restart in-church worship is continue online worship but shape the experience to reach people who normally don't come to church.

See also details incorporated below.

2 Reopening churches (We recognised that our approach will need to be flexible as there a few clear answers and will be a lot of blurry edges)

a) What timescale do you anticipate for the reopening of your churches for public worship?

We currently anticipate re-opening churches for Easter Day, possibly Palm Sunday for some churches.

b) Do you anticipate re-establishing the same pattern of worship that you had before the pandemic started?

We will have to change the pattern of services. Continuing to provide on-line worship will reduce the availability of SMT members and we anticipate having less staff (two PTOs have permanently retired, others may well be less keen now they have got used to not leading worship).

We need to consider having less Eucharistic worship and making more use of Worship Leaders. This will include re-exploring asking worship leaders to lead outside of their own church.

Frequency of services may be shaped by the number of people returning to worship (however the diocese needs to have a different approach to Share for churches that don't worship weekly, to avoid that having the effect of penalising them financially).

More joint services may be possible given some breaking down of barriers between churches.

We will need to review services times so that we can make the rota work more easily.

c) What impact do you think the pandemic will have on attendance at services?

There are many unknowns. How many people will come back? Realistically we should assume we won't have the same people return. We may have some new people, but we also will have lost some – through bereavement, increasing ill health/limited mobility, continuing anxiety about mixing or simply having got out of the habit of attending. It is recognised that it is a characteristic of pandemics and similar events that people's confidence is widely undermined.

It is possible that the numerical viability of some of our churches will not survive the pandemic.

d) What will you do to re-establish and rebuild your public worship?

Options for providing more innovative worship, that might appeal to a wider audience, should be explored, e.g. café style church.

It may be possible to use 'Back to Church Sunday' to motivate people to rejoin public worship or to use key services in the coming months to push that message.

Local churches should consider taking the initiative and leafletting their community advertising their reopening and generally encouraging people to engage or re-engage with the church by word of mouth.

Churches should be ready to respond to interest within their community either to 'celebrate the end of lockdown' or to 'remember those from the community who lost their lives'. Alternatively, churches could arrange a service for the community and encourage people to come and do both of those things.

e) What timescale do you anticipate for re-opening groups and activities?

We won't get a clear end-point to the pandemic because we don't know how much the vaccination program will return things to normal and to what extent new

variants of Covid19 will set us back. Some people may need time to get used to the greater freedom. Some people may want to see how things turn out and whether the virus will come back again. Others will want everything to restart immediately!

f) What impact do you think the pandemic will have on attendance at your groups and activities?

There are likely to be very variable levels of readiness to re-engage both with activities and with previous roles that people had in the church.

We will need to talk to group leaders to ensure a realistic approach and an understanding of members reluctance to re-engage.

We are likely to need to find new volunteers to help with many groups, activities and the day-to-day running of the church.

g) What will you do to re-establish and rebuild your groups and activities?

We need to help more people access on-line groups/meetings, so these activities are more resilient against further outbreaks of disease.

3 Rebuilding finances

a) What impact has the pandemic had on your finances?

We are awaiting 2020 accounts from our churches to assess the financial impact but we anticipate a very varied picture with some churches actually improving their finances (due to high-levels of Gift Direct usage, applications for grants and limited expenditure) whilst other churches may not have made the most of such opportunities. Churches relying heavily on fund-raising activities are likely to have particularly suffered financially.

We anticipate using some of the money provided to MAs by the RB & Diocese to even out some of these inequalities.

We recognise that 2021 may be an even harder year financially due to the lack of government grant aid and a likely backlog of building maintenance issues needing attention.

b) What are the financial implications of what has happened in the short and medium term?

Increasing take-up of Gift Direct is essential and generally increasing direct giving and reducing reliance on fund-raising will not only benefit churches financially but also make more time available for mission-orientated activity.

It would be great if the government could be persuaded to reopen the opportunity to apply for financial help for churches and community halls that were not able to apply when these opportunities were (very briefly) offered.

It is possible that the financial viability of some of our churches will not survive the pandemic.

c) *What can you do to re-establish financial stability in your Mission Area and its churches?*

It is difficult to answer this question until the scale of financial impact is clear.

4 Re-establishing structures

a) *What impact has the pandemic had on your Mission Area Conference?*

Over the course of the pandemic an increasing number of people learnt how to use Zoom to the extent that nearly all of our churches are now represented at MAC meetings. We need to identify people in the remaining churches who can access Zoom and are willing to represent their church.

b) *What pattern of meetings will you establish in the future?*

Most people recognise that there are advantages and disadvantages of using Zoom and we are likely to use a mixture of Zoom and in-person meetings in the future. Zoom meetings will be especially helpful in winter months.

c) *What impact has the pandemic had on the sub-groups of your Mission Area Conference (for example the Shared Ministry Team, the Mission Area Executive, or the Buildings Committee)?*

SMT works well by zoom but some members are unable to access meetings, so in-person meetings will be preferable in the short-term future to ensure full accessibility.

MAE generally works very well by Zoom and a mixture is likely to be used in future, largely influenced by material we need to address.

The Buildings Committee has worked well by zoom for most members. In-person meetings are better from the point of view of familiarising ourselves with all of our buildings and supporting one another, but both Zoom and email are likely to be used going forward for processing more straight-forward faculty applications etc.

MA Finance meetings have not worked by zoom, but most Finance matters were processed by email anyway, so occasional in-person meetings can continue.

d) *What pattern of meetings will you establish in the future?*

Addressed above.

5 Looking to the future

a) *When do you think your Mission Area will be able to begin to plan for growth (as part of a second stage of reconstruction), using the 'Planning for growth' guidelines provided by the diocese?*

To some extent the planning for growth stage needs to happen alongside the recovery phase because of the opportunities for change the current situation provides. A blanket returning to everything we used to do would be unhelpful even if it is possible. The work we are currently doing on our MA Strategy to very much inform our approach to rebuilding. However, *reconstruction with an eye to the future* is likely to be the main focus for 2021.

We should also recognise that Covid is unlikely to be finished with us and further setbacks to progress are likely.

We identified a few other key points not covered in the paper:

- 1) What do we see as our priorities?
- 2) What resources do we have, and what do we need, to do this work?
- 3) Well-being of ministers.

The first two questions still need to be addressed by the MA. The second of them may well highlight things the diocese needs to consider.

The third point needs to be recognised and borne in mind by all parties as it is hugely important. The impact of the pandemic has undoubtably been widespread with sweeping lifestyle changes necessary for everyone and major impacts on working practices for many. For some, most notably in the medical profession, these impacts have been hugely traumatic, but anyone whose work has been fundamentally altered or restricted for a long period of time will have been impacted.

Ministers, both lay and ordained, are amongst those affected. For many of us, everything we do changed more-or-less overnight in March 2020 and virtually all of our work has remained mis-shaped ever since. Some aspects of this, particularly dealing with bereavements and ministering to the sick and their families within the limitations imposed, have been very difficult and distressing at times. Other aspects have been less difficult, but the pattern of dealing with constant changes and having to find new ways of doing things have taken their toll in other ways. Some of these impacts are already obvious. Members of our SMT report increased levels of stress, depression, migraines, RSI and eye-problems, largely relating to excessive screen time and/or limited people time.

These issues are emerging over time and are likely to become a bigger problem in the coming months. When dealing with a crisis adrenalin covers a multitude of developing problems and it is sometimes only when the crisis eases that the full extent of these problems emerge. The well-being of lay and ordained ministers will need to be prioritised in the months ahead if we are to be able to rebuild at all.

The MA Executive were particularly keen that attention be given to the well-being of ministers and the importance of caring for the carers, not only in light of the key role that they will play in reconstruction in the months ahead, but also because of our duty of care to our staff and volunteers.