

Lillington Lockdown

Four Ways Old People's Home in Valley Road

We walked past the home everyday during the first "lockdown" and through the windows we began to see staff helping the residents dressed in full Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). We saw the occasional ambulance parked outside which always made us concerned for the residents of Four Ways.

However, one of the nicest touches of the lockdown occurred when the staff got the residents to make messages to their relatives and the wider community and they were hung on the branches, of the by now blossoming tree. In the sunshine that was around for a month or so in April and May 2020 it represented messages of love and hope from the residents for everyone in Lillington.



Lillington Free Church 2020-2021

At our service on 19th January 2020, we prayed for a Chinese doctor called Li Wenliang who had alerted people to a dangerous new respiratory virus impacting the city of Wuhan. Little did we realise at the time how greatly this event would impact our own lives or how tragically it would end for Dr Li who passed away on 7th February having contracted the disease himself.

I think like much of the UK we were distracted by the more immediate threat of Brexit and fears for what this would mean for jobs and livelihoods. Though our attention soon began to shift as we watched the deadly impact of this virus become clear. It was not long before we were watching with horror as Italian hospitals filled up, as borders were closed, and the scale of the crisis became evident.

On a personal level Sarah and I were privately rejoicing at the news that we were to become parents; our first scan had given us a glimpse the responsibilities coming our way, and we were still able to meet other first-time parents at our pre-natal class towards the end of February. I was even a little surprised when one couple asked whether coronavirus could impact pregnant mothers. Surely, Boris was right the UK could remain “calm and confident” in the face of this threat.

It was not until early March that I started to realise that the church would have to prepare a contingency plan - additional cleaning was brought in, plastic gloves were purchased, pre-wrapped biscuits replaced the usual fig rolls and rich tea biscuits. We warned people not to visit the vulnerable and assured people that services would continue as long as they were allowed.

We stubbornly continued to prepare for an Easter performance of Walter Wangerin's *The Ragman*, and dutifully everyone turned out for the evening rehearsals.

On Sunday 15th March 2020 we shared Communion with one another for the last time before Lockdown restrictions were brought in. Even then we hoped we may continue to worship in-person, but there was an odd feeling in Church that morning. We had encouraged heart shakes rather than handshakes on the door and assured people that Communion had been prepared to the highest of hygiene standards. Still as we were singing ‘Let there be love shared among us’ during the prayers of intercession there was a sense of friends saying ‘farewell’.

It was my day off the next day but as the news broke, I swiftly wrote instructions to close the Church both for midweek activities and Sunday services. I also exchanged emails with those leading the Night Shelter at Radford Road Church. On the Wednesday evening we set up a triage offering food to those who needed it outside the church and limited space for overnight sleeping, though it soon became clear that we could not continue this knowing the vulnerability of many of our volunteers.

It was Mothering Sunday on 22nd March and the flowers were already ordered. Linda Nason, Linda Reidy, and Linda Mingaye went door to door delivering them - a much-needed

encouragement to many in a tough week. Church would go online and with the help of Ben Jacobs and the team at Christ Church we would live-stream the service from there.

In the weeks and months that followed we would involve more and more of our community in preparing pre-recorded services released on YouTube, creating 2000 hours of viewing and reaching 6,400 views. Services would involve families recording hymns and songs in their own homes, prayers and readings, colourful posters for Pentecost, even dramas and sketches. Our Easter service involved over 40 people being worked together into a chorus of 'Hallelujahs' and our Christmas Nativity play was viewed by over seven hundred people via YouTube and Facebook combined.

We produced some cards to drop in to neighbours letting people know that we were available to help those who were self-isolating. We also produced a pattern for daily prayer that we circulated to our members, and Mike Calvert produced a Lockdown Edition of the Link magazine. We also started recording our services onto CD and DVD, a process which Bridget Halpin perfected enabling us to deliver the services to those who did not have access to the internet.

Friday Night Bible Studies went onto Zoom and the Wednesday Zoom Quiz was started. We all got better at learning to record ourselves and I even learnt how to use a green screen to set parts of the service to different backgrounds.

At the very end of March, we started WhatsApp groups for both Lillington Free Church and Radford Road Church as a way of combating isolation. I started writing a daily evening prayer to help people who were looking for a way to pray amidst all this upheaval, and when our son Joseph was born on his due date, 18th August 2020, then members of the congregation took this over taking turns to provide an evening prayer throughout my paternity leave and every Sunday and Monday night since.

Sadly, in April and May members of the congregation faced a number of bereavements and with restrictions on the number of mourners I started to offer recordings of the services available to those who couldn't attend. On the whole this worked out well although on one occasion my mobile phone camera was pointing the wrong way and instead recorded the audio over images of an empty cemetery!

In October we restarted in-person services on a monthly basis, using software called VMix to integrate pre-recorded and live elements of the services. This has enabled us to live-stream the services to YouTube where they can be accessed by those continuing to self-isolate. Other services continue to be available each week online.

We have learned not to get our hopes too high, not to look too far into the future, to deal first with the day before us asking God that he might give us this day our daily bread, though as the NHS's herculean vaccination effort rolls out, we are beginning to dream again of a time when life might be that little bit more normal.

One more personal note: I am still so grateful for every card, gift and kindness shown to us when Joseph was born and since then.

I created a memory book of photos of Sarah's pregnancy and it was lovely that we could hold a socially distanced baby shower for her at the Church at the beginning of August. To close that book, I wrote this paragraph:

'To many 2020 will be a year synonymous with struggle, isolation and uncertainty. Back in January, few of us understood the language of epidemics, 'social distancing', 'shielding', but by the time you were due to be born we had endured six months of it and we needed a cause for celebration. You were that cause. You brought a few of us back together to give thanks for your life. For your mummy and daddy 2020 will always be a year we look back on a remember with joy, as the year that brought you into our lives.'

It has been hard for so many, but it has not been unremittingly bleak – we have tried where we might to hold on to the light.

James Church