

Reflecting on the pandemic

What has been your experience of 'journeying together' these last eighteen months – as parish/community?

- Shock of suddenness
- Frightening time
- Time to stop and think
- Funerals were difficult.
- Reach out to others and by phone and be reached by others
- Grateful for live-streamed Masses (and CDs) and other Masses round the world.
- Missed receiving communion. Good to receive communion from EMs
- IT very important. Helped to create a feeling of togetherness
- Prayed with others in a new way. Explored more ways of prayer eg spiritual meditation.
- Enjoyed recording hymns. Music meant a lot to many people.
- Working from home
- God was helping us through a difficult time with support from neighbours and parishioners – some have met new parishioners through helping and supporting.
- New routines helped
- Reconnecting with faith – helped to fill the emptiness
- Church made effort to keep in touch with parishioners
- The church is built on all the people in it.

What strengths did I find in my faith and faith community?

- Grateful to have a faith. Strengthened faith. This trial has allowed them to see their faith more clearly
- Felt strength from God in my prayers, neighbours, NHS; and a confidence to let The Lord lead them.
- We can keep going in the faith without Church
- Sharing belief in Church with other people.
- Returning to Mass – gave sense of community – shared faith.
- Scripture involvement helped at lonely times. Sermons online and meditation group.
- Being able to attend more funerals remotely means being part of a community at that key time.
- Mass online daily./ Parish opened itself & was accessible via media – great joy
- Helping with food distribution was tremendous.
- Daily reflections & photos were very helpful – uplifting & moving.
- FUWU & Community pantry was wonderful.
- We have been given time to think, reflect, be peaceful and appreciate and be awed by the glories of creation, particularly when the world felt so quiet. The wonders of nature were all around us.

How was I disappointed or sorrowful?

- Missed mass and Holy Communion.
- Missed coffee time and socialising at church

- No access to IT cut people off from church.
- Missed funerals – paying respect.
- Separation from grandchildren and other family. Not seeing people – in person.
- Want to see children involved in all masses/activities.
- Missed social interaction lack of connection to senior members in church. Feeling of isolation. Missed coffee time and coming together after Mass. All clubs stopped that made part of routine. Missed hugging.
- There was a general feeling of great sadness and sorrow for each other, the wider community and across the globe.

In what ways did the grace of God most clearly touch and uplift me?

- Options for support – telephone calls, telephone from others.
- Grace of God working through others helping – NHS, community.
- Better to say presence of God. God will prevail no matter what.
- More emotion on receiving The Lord in the pandemic
- The use of technology to form community groups around roads/neighbourhoods
- Feeding the hungry FUWU and pantry
- The wonderful things people did – hearing it on tv & news.
- Loved clapping for NHS.
- Enthused about projects involved in.
- Walk – more time together.
- Great efforts were made to retain normality, e.g. the choir and other musicians recording music for masses.
- Singing together once more has been wonderful
- The sounds and sights of nature: birds singing: the glorious colours of the trees, flowers, skies and the extra appreciation of these things that we often take for granted
- General kindness of others

Participation

Who is the church ?

- Answers differ from our parish to everybody as we are all God's children
- Points. Greater participation of young. Suggestions from scouts to young adults. They should be encouraged in all activities such as readers at mass to social work.
- People missed contact with others e.g. coffee after Sunday mass. A few felt they were not really welcome or found no warmth.
- The streamed mass was/is greatly appreciated. (need for visits, home communion)
- Prayer and new ways of prayer developed by a fair number.

Who is missing?

- Nearly all those who are alone and need help from refugees homeless LGBTQ etc to elderly parishioners. The phone buddies has been appreciated.

- Lapsed are a big concern. Greater contact with other churches .Divorced and remarried or marriage problems.
- .Some feel Church administration is out dated, need for consultation of laity from use of lectionaries in liturgy right through to role of women, married clergy etc.
- A few suggestions such as need for more groups (young marrieds, new parishoners ,youth)

Whom do we need to listen to?

- Answers to this question cover most of those already mentioned above. The Holy Spirit, the pope, all who have gifts to offer. Youth again mentioned a lot and also the lapsed.
- General impression from answers is that we are not good at listening. Also need to see what people do as many will not speak or share their ideas, concerns.

Communion

Thinking about the pandemic, and perhaps more broadly,

When does journeying together in the Church bring joy?

- Singing/praying together in the Church; Pilgrimages e.g. Walsingham.
- A greater appreciation of the joy of praying in person with others.
- Being together to help each other, to listen & offer support. Joy preparing children for First Communion + Confirmation – loved their Masses.
- Music – choir & other musicians – share & develop - quite exciting.
- Priests are also part of the community rather than a separate group
- Finding strength in belonging to the church community
- Despite being physically separated we still felt connected, e.g. by the virtual masses.
- We felt a sense of togetherness.

When might bring pain or sadness?

- The inability to have physical Eucharist.
- Just loss of parishioners.
- Not being able to say goodbye to those we loved when they died.
- Not getting together to participate
- Restrictions on personal contacts at difficult times
- The drifting away of younger members of the parish. To encourage more young people to want to become active members of the community again
- The world is in pain – and a concern that solutions posed to address this are not in accord with the Gospel
- We asked how the voice of the young could be brought to the Synod – did we invite them? Suggestions of involving schools via RE lessons were mooted. Simplified versions of some of the questions posed in this sharing could be asked of younger children

What has the experience of “journeying together” taught us about what it means to be Church ?

- Church should be more ‘Family’ – should attract others in
- Not a building – but the ‘Body of Christ’ – the people, ‘us’ – especially so when we couldn’t all be together.
- People of God gathered together to worship together
- Church is not a building; it is the people who embrace being together as a community who have faith and belief in God, regardless of their own personal religion or denomination.
- We are all one in Christ’s love. The Church is “us”. Whatever we do is key. Joy is having a Christian family.

Mission

What would you wish to celebrate about how your parish/community lives its mission?

- Attention to the poor, marginalised and the vulnerable. (Pantry, Food Bank, Fund raising, Parish website...)
- Outreaching to people *especially during the time of pandemic* (Taking Communion, Newsletters, broadcasting, etc...)
- Parish Social Communities (FUWU, coffee mornings, etc, Bethany Club, ILSSG, Gardening, Music groups, Live Simply)
- Pastoral events (The Passover Meal, The Michelmas Fayre, big social, with people offering party pieces; The beautiful Stations of the Cross led by the Confirmation Group.)

How does your community decide priorities for mission?

- Parish Council; Grass roots groups; Churches Together, Councillors/MPs, Twinning Associations, Grass roots groups and charities (Food Bank, Hitchin Pantry, Feed Up Warm Up), Cafod.

What areas of mission are we neglecting?

- THE YOUTH (Carers, youth is abandoned after the sacraments)
- Climate change, Injustice, Inequality. Stand up against what is wrong/speak up for the voiceless.
- Minorities
- Theology teaching

Discernment

- A Church which treats every human being with equal dignity.
- A Church which always puts Christ at its heart.
- A Church which recognises the work of the Holy Spirit everywhere.
- A Church which is attractive to anyone seeking truth.
- Voice of young people missing
- Greater affirmation for Priests and People
- More openness and consultation
- Need for more teaching

- Greater inclusion in decision making
- Place of women, minorities, gender groups LGBTQ+
- We all share the same faith
- Think of oneself as part of a greater family
- Church Role in Society?
- Church Voice needs to be much louder
- Relationship issues need clearer teaching
- Importance of symbols
- Social activity important to faith
- Social care activity important to faith
- Welcome key to our faith community
- Importance of communication.
- Community = Family
- Relationship between laity and Hierarchy ???
- Call to continue Synodal gathering meetings
- Moral/Ethical teaching
- Call for bottoms up Church
- Importance of presence of Children and families
- Ministers and ministries need new reflection
- Clarify our mission
- Introduce Buddy system for new parishioners
- How to move ecumenism forward.
- Marriage & Divorce needs new reflection
- Opportunity for thorough renewal
- Importance of sharing faith face to face.

Share your thoughts themes 1-3

The Good, bad and ugly of the pandemic and the presence of God

People felt that God was present throughout the pandemic; faith sustained the people there was difficulty about not being able to worship in person and share in fellowship. However, the pause on the norm freed up time to reflect on life and faith, this was helped by the daily reflections sent out and having the ability to participate in mass virtual both through sound cloud and the portal. Some suggested that they carried on their reflections whilst on their daily walks in nature. There were some who expressed gratitude to being able to help record the music for the liturgy.

The joys of belonging to the parish or community

The overarching comments from everyone was the fact that the parish is tightly knitted together this flows from the clergy and the pastoral team into the wider parish into the pockets of the social groups that happen in the parish. The ability to interact with each other

When we say 'Our Church' who is it & who is missing? And what areas of mission do we need to develop?

Generally people interpreted the term 'Our Church' as the parish. However, others commented on the spelling if church started with a capital 'C' their interpretation was

expanded to include the universal church. Others included other Christian denominations and other religions if spelt with a lower case 'c'.

A barrier that was highlighted was that of the hierarchal structure of the church and the formal language that is used by the church.

It was felt that there are many groups of people missing from the community. Namely

- young people
- Lapsed Catholics
- LGBTQ+

Share your thoughts themes 4-6

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU FEEL WELCOMED, LOVED AND VALUED FOR WHO YOU ARE IN YOUR PARISH OR COMMUNITY?

****Feeling Belonging and welcome because of experiencing love and care being in a caring community (This has been shared by many.)**

- In times of distress I have been listened to kindly by parishioners. Their patience helping me cope with life and difficult situations.
- when moving to the parish, there was a personal connection via a mutual friend to the parish priest.
- People look out for each other
- Our pastoral assistant helps us create community, helping us to help others, pointing out needs, to give lifts, visit the housebound
- As part of the Ministry of the Word, I feel a strong bond of love and tenderness with the community to whom it is proclaimed.
- A home from home, appreciated for any part we play however small

****Some have expressed their suffering in regard to this question**

- "When the opportunity was there to value me, I was thrown aside."
- Are we truly welcoming where rules top love, trust and personal involvement, especially for the young, where they feel more accepted as themselves elsewhere?

****An Underlying challenge emerges from question 4: How to become known, valued for oneself, one's gifts within parish?**

- Occasions needed for all people to be seen for their unique gifts and cherished in an interpersonal manner. Music, discussion groups, coffee mornings?
- Welcomed, but don't know many people really.
- Masks and social distancing not helping.
- I was received into the Catholic Church in Hitchin. I feel welcomed and valued.
- Not possible to know or be known by everyone in a parish as large as ours.
- The welcome I receive on entering Church makes me feel loved and valued
- Some people's lives only permit them to attend liturgies
- Do we value and appreciate people for their role in life? (another aspect of being known). Or just those who help within the parish?

5. WHAT STEPS MIGHT THE HOLY SPIRIT BE INVITING THE CHURCH TO TAKE IN ORDER TO MAKE OUR PARISHES AND COMMUNITIES MORE WELCOMING, INCLUSIVE AND MISSIONARY

**more welcoming

- Social home visits to parishioners
- New people registered with our parish offered a visit by a parish member with parish/local information
- When people move from one parish, helped to be introduced to new parish
- Name tags in church so we get to know each other, -

**more inclusive

- Accept the inclusion of the laity and women at all levels, in all roles and with an equal say to those in holy orders in all matters.
- Occasional lay reflection/homily on the gospel (checked by the parish priest)
- More inclusive language
- Accept God created LGBT+ people and loves them as they are, wants them to have fulfilled loving partnerships.
- Anyone not fitting the model the 'Church leaders' want to promote is 'not listened to'.

ecumenically

- Go out to people more as a community with other churches
- More joint events with other Christians, such as prayer services of other faiths
- Be open to the beliefs of other world religions to discover what we have in common sacramentally
- I believe the Holy Spirit is inviting the Church to more fully embrace people who have remarried after divorce
- Celebrate same sex relationships and marriage
- Allowing other Christians to take communion
- Married priests
- Include all in the eucharist to reflect Christ's inclusiveness of children
- Start children to pray very young

**underlying theme in all our synod sharings: We need guidance/help/models/space/permission for reflection for adults and families and children to listen and discuss openly challenges in our lives, church teaching, and where church teaching fails to reflect Christ's gospel of love, compassion and inclusiveness.

- I feel I have failed by my behaviour, lack of understanding, meaningful discussion to pass on the teachings of the Church to my children. I was not a good listener.
- Adult balanced dialogue needed, on many issues such as contraception and abortion, as its lack has caused attrition in Church members.
- Faith is a journey. The road can be bumpy. Sometimes we need spiritual guidance to help us. To reflect on what the Gospels are teaching, how best to live out our sometimes chaotic lives.
- Homilies not just on the readings but on issues of life - such as those looked at by Pope Francis in 'The Joy of Love', or Jonathan Sacks in his book Morality.

Question 6: What dreams for the Church do you have?

**dreams for our Catholic priesthood

- I wish priests were allowed to marry (mentioned frequently)

- More vocations to the priesthood and religious life

- Where all (roles) deacons, priests, bishops, etc. open to women and men equally (mentioned frequently)

*dreams for unity

- For peace among all people, that people love one another, love animals and value our beautiful world. A fulfilment of Jesus' prayer "That all may be one."

- That the Church will grow closer together.

- That our Church and all faiths become relevant and mainstream in society.

- That we may be inclusive as that of the early Church, praying together and following Jesus' teaching regarding love, trust and responsibility.

- That the Church learns that change, even to ritual, is not a bad thing.

*dreams for our families and young people

- Bring our children and young families back

- Families are the bedrock of our faith

- For our Churches to be filled with enthusiastic families, happy to be at Mass. They need more support and encouragement. spiritual guidance.

- Regular family Masses with encouragement to prepare Liturgy and Music.

- A Church that develops a healthier attitude to sexuality, and celebrates it as a gift from God, talking more about the joy of relationship.

*dreams of inclusion

- A Church which treats every human being with equal dignity.

- A Church where the Bishops support an inclusive lectionary so women are acknowledged.

- Open acceptance that not being heterosexual is the equivalent of being born with red hair and NOT a sin.

- A Church which recognises the work of the Holy Spirit everywhere.

- A Church which always puts Christ at its heart.

*dreams for a listening church

- Making sure people are listened to and the Church to be critically transparent and inclusive in decision making.

- The Employment Tribunal (of Our Lady's School teachers v. DOWAT) highlighted a lack of listening in the Academy process. Many parents wrote to all levels of the hierarchy (of their concerns) with no response.

- The Church to show, by its actions, a standard for good, for empathy, for understanding and the betterment of mankind across all peoples, and faiths of the world.

- A Church where recent scandals (and any future ones) are acknowledged and openly repented.

- That this be part of our penitential act in Mass: "Let us acknowledge our sins, and the sins of the Church and Church Institutions, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the Sacred Mysteries."