
STORIES OF CHURCH LIFE DONE DIFFERENTLY

Redefined pastoral care and sharing faith

West Church, Bangor

When lockdown struck it seemed as if we were all forced into our respective burrows without warning. What happened thereafter, was not a series of well-planned or thought through actions but rather a series of responses which we trusted were prompted by the Lord. We knew we couldn't simply let our members drift away from their moorings or be cut free by the winds of coronavirus. We felt we needed to make contact, both to check that folk were managing, but also to let them know they were not alone and not forgotten.

Our dormant district lists were resurrected and we set about conscripting people to telephone. We provided a few pointers to help with the initial call and because we were keen that prayer should be part of each call, we provided some prayers to help where necessary. The conversations were to be friendly, supportive and pastoral. Any weightier pastoral issues were to be escalated to the members of our pastoral team. Many of the subsequent conversations were on everyday things, but also on matters of faith and trust. People were usually keen to talk and prayer was rarely refused. We know of at least one person who came to faith as a result.

Although inevitably there were gaps and over time some members understandably grew weary with juggling the demands of home life and work, the calls were appreciated and stories began to circulate of a range of pastoral support and practical help that was generated as a result.

As lockdown eased and Sunday services returned, we were acutely aware that not everyone felt comfortable with returning to a large group. In addition we began to sense that people missed social interaction, meaningful conversations and the opportunity to engage with one another in an authentic way about spiritual matters. All of that pointed to the value of finding a way to begin regathering in small groups.

We took the opportunity to rebrand our home groups as 'Life' groups, encouraging the existing ones to meet on church premises as well as setting up five or six new ones. That sparked the idea of asking the telephone callers to invite those who they had been calling to come together on church premises, socially distanced, for about an hour.

The gatherings adhered to the required precautions and were limited to 10. As they were scheduled to meet during the day, they tended to attract retired people. They took the form of conversations about what was most difficult during lockdown, what was enjoyed, things that were missed, new skills that were learnt and new activities that were tackled. Each gathering finished with a short devotional. So far twenty-three different groups have met.

For some, the group was their first sortie into a public place and built confidence in resuming more normal life. For most, it was a time to renew friendship or forge new ones. It has been very apparent that people have missed church very deeply. The groups, therefore, provided a safe space in which they could share openly and honestly. There was much laughter but also tears as some laid bare their hearts and the pain they had experienced during lockdown. It has been heart-warming to receive texts, emails, cards and to hear the appreciation of those who have attended. The groups have been a lifeline to people and many want to know when they can meet again.