

All Saints, Hérault: Chaplain's Report for 2020

Our last 'real' service was on 8 March 2020. The sensible anti-COVID measures from the Diocese in Europe, the local French restrictions and the fact that many of our congregation are 'vulnerable' means that we won't be meeting socially or for worship until it's clearly safe to do so. As I say on the website, I hope that you will keep in touch with your friends from All Saints by phone, e-mail and social media. Let's look after each other.

Fortunately, I come from a technical background and have been able to use modern computer technology to try to keep us in touch. The normal Sunday services have been replaced by podcasts, first of all in sound only and then using YouTube. We used Zoom for our very late 2020 AGM in November and the following Council meetings. The monthly prayer group has been transferred to YouTube and is now twice per month. Interestingly, the attendance is now much higher.

As many have found in other spheres of life, there is no substitute for actually being with people for proper communication, whether it's a Council meeting, a service or just a chat. But I think the technology we've been using will continue to have a bigger role when normality finally breaks out, in the wider world and in our chaplaincy. The restrictions of the pandemic were not all negative. Members of the congregation could participate in our events from anywhere in the world: our Good Friday podcast had one lesson reader in Australia and another in Île d'Oléron!

I have not added my usual chart for attendance figures this year. We know how many downloads there have been for each event, but not how many people have watched or listened to their download. Quite often, for a couple or a family, it will be more than one person, so 'attendance' is difficult to assess from downloads. Maybe one should add 50% to the download number to get a better idea. The average number of downloads for electronic services in 2020 was 34, so our numbers have held up well.

The pandemic caused the Lent groups to

come to a grinding halt after only one session: this was a great pity as 21 people had attended. It was our usual type of course, based on watching excerpts from a film and relating it to our faith. This time the film was 'Casablanca' and the course was called 'A beautiful friendship', by Paul Kerensa & Zoë Young. I hope that we can reboot this, perhaps in 2022.

Delia and I changed our minds in 2020 about retirement. Here is the message, under the heading 'A Chap Can Change His Mind', that I sent to Chaplaincy Council members in September.

Delia and I have been mulling over my plan to retire in April next year. The reasons for retirement were a desire to have more flexibility concerning things like our visits to family in the UK and holidays; also some of the more stressful aspects of being chaplain were a factor.

We have decided, if it's acceptable to you, that I will not retire on that date after all. However, when the 'new normal' comes, Delia and I will not always put the chaplaincy first when making plans, especially those involving family and friends in the UK. We shall now set to work again on the document that I think you know exists in draft form, listing the various things we do to keep the chaplaincy running smoothly. There are items on there that most of you don't know anything about; there will probably be items that you think don't really need doing, but we do them because we're pedants. The idea is that over the months and years until I actually retire most of those things will be taken over by somebody else.

My licence from the bishop runs out in November 2021 and I have been in touch with the archdeacon to ask whether the diocese is likely to renew it. The answer is a qualified 'yes'...

As usual, we all owe a debt of gratitude to those who work so hard to keep our chaplaincy flourishing: Patricia, Nigel, Julie, the music team and the Council members amongst others.

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We are especially grateful to two people who retired from their positions last year, Jenny Morgan and Francis Bigot. Jenny has led a very important part of our ministry, Safeguarding, since we began in 2013. She has guided us safely through many dangers, toils, and snares. Francis has worked with Nigel to look after our finances since 2016: an important job behind the scenes.

This strange year was a dreadful one in many respects: but there have been some unexpected benefits. The selflessness shown by front-line workers, particularly in our health services, has been an example and inspiration to us all. Many people have had a chance to step back from a frenetic way of life, with time to reflect on what is really important. I pray that the 'new normal', when it comes, will be a kinder and gentler one.

Roger Smith
Chaplain

March 2021