

Worship During the Pandemic – A Preacher’s Experiences

from Michael Harris, Methodist Local Preacher and good friend of Fillongley Church

On March 15th 2020 I led worship at my own church. It was the Church Anniversary we celebrated the 90 years of the church’s work and witness in south Coventry. I first was put “On Trial” back in 1952 and for 68 years have led worship and preached in many churches in numerous circuits throughout Methodism. Influenced by the worship at my family’s church in Foleshill, Coventry, by the liturgy in the chapel of my Oxford college and by the services at the Wesley Memorial Church in that city, I had grown up with a love of dignity in worship, a feeling for what was called “the beauty of holiness,” a respect for what Paul called things done “decently and in order,” and a delight in singing the hymns of Charles Wesley. I therefore hoped that at that Church Anniversary service I might help the congregation to worship with reverence and joy, giving thanks for all that was past and trusting in God for the years ahead.

The only unusual features of our meeting together were that we were all invited to use hand sanitisers as we entered the church and to forego the shaking of hands at the end of the service. We didn’t quite realise that this would be the last occasion on which we would meet.

Since that morning I have had several encounters with experiments in worship and would like to record and share them in the hope that they might both inform and possibly help others to find and develop ways of continuing the life of the church each week. And the first thing I would say here is that every experience has demonstrated that we in the Methodist Church (and I suspect this is true of other denominations) have discovered that the present crisis and the closure of our churches have compelled us to concentrate on our own resources, ingenuity and determination to maintain our sense of fellowship, our desire to worship and our caring ministry. I believe that, despite the circuit, district and connexional structure of Methodism, it is the individual churches and their members that now and in the future will be the determining factors in the post-pandemic life of the Church. Just as globalism is being challenged in the world at large, so centralisation will be challenged in the Church. And I look forward to it.

So what have been my experiences? Firstly, aided by our minister, Richard, whose pastoral concern for us all had already endeared him to us, and employing the skills of one of our most technically competent members, it became possible for us to share visually in worship whenever our minister was planned. His scripted service was filmed from his home, either indoors or quite often in the garden or neighbouring fields, and both the script and the film made available on line for the next Sunday’s time of worship. The words of hymns and songs were also printed and accompaniments played, so that we could either listen or sing them in our homes. After a very short time it was possible to add others to read the Bible passages and/or lead the prayers. The highlight of these services however has been that we have been able to celebrate Holy Communion not “virtually” but in a real way as we have been invited to share our own bread and wine at home as our minister and his wife have shared theirs. I wonder how many more of our ministers and congregations have ignored the prohibition of the Methodist Conference against “on-line” Holy Communion: more than the out-of-touch leaders of our Church can imagine I suspect. And now even Conference has asked the Faith and Order Committee to further “reflect” on the subject. So, at least once a month I know that I am sharing with my fellow-members in the Eucharist, a meaningful act that brings us together and maintains our worshipping unity.

On other occasions, usually when local preachers have been planned, we have been provided with a purely Audio service with the full printed version available on line and some members without other facilities have been able to download it from their telephones.

One of the experiments saw a brave attempt by our visiting preacher to conduct the service himself via Zoom. The content of the service was helpful and relevant, but the technicalities of linking up with a number of families and the attempt to “mute” and “unmute” together with problems relating to the streaming

of the songs, unfortunately created a sense that these issues had led to a distraction from the content of the service.

There are congregations however in which very few members have laptops or iPads, no access to the internet and cannot therefore see services. I was planned to lead worship at one such church in early June and found that, thanks partly to the technical skills of our Circuit Administrator and the co-operation of two of the church members, it had been made possible for the majority of the elderly members of the congregation to make a link to the service via their telephones. I was able to prepare my service with the assurance that it would be heard even if I was not seen – a possible advantage! The members had agreed that their services should begin at 9.30 a.m. and a few minutes before that time I was successfully linked to the church and could see on my screen the names and part of the ‘phone numbers of members of the congregation as they arrived and were greeted. The co-ordinator, one of the two church members referred to above, greeted the new arrivals and checked that the various readers were also present. At 9.30 he welcomed me and I began the service. The advantages of such a system soon became apparent. I was not required to submit a pre-prepared script and so could remain flexible and less formal in my contact with the congregation and, more importantly, could engage with them by asking questions, sharing the Lord’s Prayer and Blessing, and hearing the responses during the intercessions. The only drawback was of course that we could not sing, a deprivation that has hit me more than any other aspect of my life of worship and praise. I could however speak to my listeners, most of them known to me for many years, at the end of the service and exchange greetings and good wishes. A delightful conclusion was reached when our Circuit Administrator, who had remained “on line” throughout the service informed me that some of the congregation had left their phones on, but that I need not worry as the post-service comments had been very favourable.

Then came the possibility of new developments when at the beginning of July churches were able to reopen for more than just individual private personal prayer. The Circuit has within its an Anglican/Methodist united church in the village of Fillongley, where the services take place in the parish church, and soon after the announcement of the releasing of the lockdown it was decided to reopen the church and arrangements were published explaining the restrictions that would inevitably be applied. As the church shares its priest with a neighbouring parish the arrangements would be that on alternate Sunday mornings there would be a service of Holy Communion at 9.00 hrs. in one church and a worship/preaching service in the other at 10.30 hrs. On the first Sunday I drove out the eight miles from my home to the 10.30 service and the following week shared in the 9.00 Holy Communion service. The arrangements were clearly explained and we entered the church by the main south door where a table stood with an antiseptic hand wash available. The appropriate social distance between worshippers was maintained by signs indicating that alternate rows of pews could be used. Music was played over the loudspeaker system before the service and recordings of the hymns by various cathedral, college and other choirs were used. As the church is united it has both an Anglican vicar and a Methodist minister and both were present at the first service which was actually led by the new vicar, a lady who has not yet been formally inducted owing to the crisis. The lessons were read by the Methodist minister and a member of the congregation and the words of prayers and responses etc. were projected on a large screen. The following week the Holy Communion service took the form of what was described as a “President’s Communion” in which the presiding vicar took the elements on behalf of all of us. It was a very reverent experience and the prayers used were appropriate and relevant. At both services a short reflection was given based on the Gospel reading for the day and related in some way to the current situation in which the world finds itself. And at the conclusion of each service we were encouraged to maintain a distance from others and leave the church by a different door from that by which we had entered, and were greeted by the clergy in the churchyard as we left. I was encouraged and uplifted by these two experiences and will revisit the church again from time to time until such time and my own and other churches reopen.

So what next?

Have I learnt anything from my experience of the services in which I have participated since that Church Anniversary service back in March?

I believe that we may never return exactly to the situation in our churches or their forms of worship with which we have become so familiar over several generations, nor would I wish to. I believe that we are now presented with challenges that, if met could lead to a different and better church with stronger ties with the community and more relevant forms of worship and expressions of witness. We may at last be on the verge of understanding the church's place in the 21st century.

Let me put a few questions that should exercise us in the next months and even years.

Do we want to return to the forms of worship that we have known and practised for so long or have we been given the opportunities to rethink them?

We have become used to shorter, more concentrated services, with virtually no distractions from the worship. Do we want this to continue?

We have become used to short reflections, usually based on the main Bible reading but also on the major issues of the moment. Do we want to return to the former type of sermon?

We have become used to prayers that focus precisely on topics that have dominated the news and raised issues of direct political and social importance – e.g. the medical and nursing professions, care homes and their staff and residents, those who have kept our society safe and provided for our needs, etc. Are we willing to devote more time to our intercessions for others?

We have become used to services without singing hymns, and we acknowledge that this is a real hardship when we recognise that “Methodism was born in song.” Will we be able to find a way of expressing our praise, adoration and all the other aspects of our faith in music and song in the future?

We have become aware of the fact that when we do return to worship together we will not be able to extend “the right hand of fellowship” to our friends, either when first meeting them or (possibly even more distressing for some) during the exchange of the Peace in the Communion service. Will we be able to accept this and find some alternative?

Perhaps the most significant challenge has been that over recent months we have learnt to worship either alone or in small family groups in our own homes, even though we have been linked with others in various technical ways. As a Church are we now being challenged to consider the future possibility of continuing to meet for worship, fellowship and other activities in small classes as our Methodist forebears did?

And all these points and questions raise one of the most important of them all? What is the future for our church buildings? It is widely agreed that we have too many such premises and a strong defence is mounted that stresses their value as community amenities. But is this a strong enough argument for the preservation of what would otherwise be recognised as “redundant” churches without such community use?

So many questions, so many challenges for the future! But of one thing I remain convinced at the age of 86, an old man who “dreams dreams” – that it will be unwise to think that we can return to “normal,” I believe that this terrible crisis that has affected the whole world to a greater and lesser extent, has also presented the world with the opportunity to make a new start in many ways, and that the same opportunities are available for the Methodist Church and its individual churches. May we have the vision and courage to embrace them and may we rely on the Lord God to be with us.

Michael Harris July 2020