

12.ix.2021

Dear Church family,

Even though we may not have school or college-aged children in our family, habits of term time and holidays run deep, and September sees the start of a new year, a regroup after the summer, and looking ahead, to the rest of the year including Advent and Christmas! What times and what a curious start after such a glorious August together... Thank you for your understanding, prayers and care following my recent bout of Covid-19!

In response to the reset and reimagine conversations, we are starting a new series on 12th September that will take us through to Advent, entitled 'Everyday Faith in a post-pandemic world'. We will look together at big Bible themes that will help us navigate our changing and, at times, deeply uncertain world. Richard Rohr reminds us that the world has changed; each of us has had our lives and communities significantly disrupted since March 2020. Yet, in other ways, there is a sense, particularly during self-isolation that we have never been more alone. How then do we respond? What is God saying to us as individuals and as a church family? Many are weary and burdened emotionally, physically, psychologically and spiritually. Recovery time is much needed and yet the world continues to turn, life demands much of us, the 'great pause' of lockdown is over. The good news is that scripture is full of invitations to find our recovery in God. His invitation is to come aside, to pause and draw breath, to find strength, to drink from the well and be filled again with His Holy Spirit. Our Encounters with Jesus series throughout August powerfully reminded us that recovery for each of us begins with our own daily encounters with Jesus. Keep on looking to Him!

As the PCC have prayerfully considered what reset and reimagine looks like, recognising the challenges and limitations of time and place, we have agreed that we will not resume the 1830 service at SPSV. Despite our best efforts and the provision of hospitality before the service, this congregation has not grown, rather has steadily declined. We appreciate that this decision has been hard for some for whom this is a familiar place and community but are really thrilled that, as a result, the 0830 congregation at SPSV has been steadily growing, week by week, with an average of twenty seven people and that everyone will either be catered for by the 0830 service or the new Life Group which will start later this month led by Anne Philpott. Looking ahead and with the much prayed-for appointment of an Associate Pastor with responsibility for children and youth, we hope to plant an afternoon congregation for families, that there might be new expressions of worship within the heart of Swanley Village. Anne's life group is one of three new groups (2 daytime and one evening) beginning to meet this month – we are so encouraged that, to date, twenty-eight people have been found homes where they can gather with others during the week. Please pray for Anne, Dave and Michelle Pryke and myself as we lead these groups, going forward. If you are not yet part of a Life Group, please do contact me as I'd love to make this happen!

The need for new life groups is a sign that God is clearly on the move, with stirrings of faith for the first time for many who have questioned life more deeply during Covid. As a result, I have had the joy and privilege of giving away twelve Bibles to interested or brand-new Christians. Hearing testimony of individual encounters with Jesus for the first time is so very precious; there are signs of new life across our congregations and, as a result, we will be holding an Alpha group in the coming months, so please let me know if you would like to be involved in leading or attending to discover more together about what it means to love, serve and follow Jesus in this post-pandemic world.

As a result of Covid restrictions, our baptism and confirmation service in 2020 was unable to take place. This is an opportunity for individuals to publicly profess their faith; one of our fondest memories of life was when Bob Whyte was confirmed, increasingly frail physically and needing to be held up either side by Julie and Andy, Bob would not sit down, commenting that Jesus had endured much for him and the least he could do was to stand in response. If you would like to know more about either baptism or confirmation, please contact me. Register your interest by the end of October so that we might prepare and plan with you. Our service will be led by Bishop Simon on 21st November 2021 at 1830 at St Peter's.

As well as signs of spiritual life, there are signs of the physical completion of the Annexe and all that we believe God has called us to be and do through the space to better serve and welcome the wider community. Theobalds the builders started work in the early summer, and aim to complete it in late December. Thus far they are on course. Their standard of workmanship is top-notch; with Kevin Swift commenting that he's never seen a cleaner or tidier site!! The sequencing of the works has inevitably changed in the light of materials and trades availability with the external works being now much later in the plan, hence less visible difference. The Annexe Development Team, supported by a new Finance working group, are thinking through the many aspects, in working well together, each bringing different skills and abilities for the greater good. Please pray for the remaining grant funding; there are some applications have been made and decisions are awaited. We have a sense that 'answers' are going to go to the wire and so we continue to trust God for the necessary monies to see the Annexe opened and the community served. There will be dedicated times of prayer ahead for the annexe as we seek to recruit a coffee shop manager and part time deputy. Pray on for this!

St Peter's and St Paul's has long been seen as a resource church where we seek not only to equip and enable our own to flourish as Christians in the world but also to serve those from other churches. Overflow is a true expression of this; a time of extended worship, teaching, opportunity to hear from God and receive ministry. This will restart on Sunday 3rd October at the new time of 6.30pm, and the first of each month thereafter – please do join us and invite others at St Peters.

We have planned a busy few months leading to Christmas. Events of the last week have particularly shown that the best of our plans can be totally and frustratingly thwarted, our own preferences laid aside for the good and safety of all. As your vicar and as a PCC, we will continue to seek God for His mind and will in all things, trusting His purpose in and through it all. As Julie and I head off for a few much-anticipated days in Cornwall at the end of this month, we send our love and prayers...

Sincerest thanks for you,

Johnny

2 Corinthians 4:16-18