

Learning and Looking Ahead

Analysis of Responses

Introduction

I'm pleased to say that I received close to 40 responses to the questions publicised at the start of June. Some were concise, others quite lengthy; some stuck to the questions, others commented more generally. All were thoughtful.

While this is certainly not a scientific analysis, I hope it rings true to the substance of the comments people made. Under each question, themes or issues are listed according to how frequently they were mentioned, i.e. the first was mentioned most (number of comments / respondents shown in brackets).

1. What has been good, and what has been not so good, about the ways St Michael's has adapted during the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown?

Good

Online services (31): not just the fact that they happened, but the quality and many specific aspects drew widespread praise – the length, mix of formality and informality, the differing styles of music, the involvement of young people, clear and challenging talks with prompts for follow-up, Communion being more personal with less pomp. It was noted they were reaching people who don't or can't normally attend services – people could drop in without having to enter a possibly intimidating church building - and could be enjoyed flexibly (“Absolutely brilliant being able to worship in pyjamas – we're not morning people!”).

Setting up Linlithgow Coronavirus Support (19): “...showed that we are the hands and feet of God, not simply a historic building...” and increased engagement with the community.

Various groups meeting online (18): the list included Seedlings, Sunday Club, Wednesday Prayers, the choir, bereavement support and the BBs. Several people commented particularly on the small groups – very accessible and good that they were all discussing the same material, going into the themes of the services in more depth.

Elders having regular contact with their districts (12): there were positive comments both from elders about the great response (“a bit of a revelation for me”) and from members (“My elder has also sent personal letters and emails - she has always done this but they have been much appreciated during Lock Down”).

Improvements in communications (8): the website, Facebook, the letter to members and the email newsletter were all mentioned.

Making the services available by phone (7).

The Facebook Questions session: “terrific” (7).

Other comments:

- The Coordinating Team taking the lead
- Questions for further study / reflection after each service
- The core of people who kept things going, in particular Val.

Not so Good

Missing face-to-face fellowship (7): “nothing beats actually meeting up in fellowship”.

Off-line members (5): have we done enough, or moved quickly enough, to assist them?

Inconsistent response from elders (4): some have struggled to maintain regular contact with their districts.

Other points mentioned:

- Difficulty in finding things on the website (“requires decluttered”) or in finding the online services
- Missing the monthly prayer calendar
- Not clear if there is an overall operating plan, particularly for our finances
- Lack of interactive services (this comment was submitted before the post-service Zoom sessions started)
- The inability to engage in face-to-face pastoral and bereavement work.

2. Thinking about all the ways St Michael’s has adapted recently, which of these practices should we continue with and build on for the future?

Online / streamed services (27): many commented that these will be needed for some time until people feel confident about gathering for public worship again. But other benefits were also noted: good for outreach; accessible to those unfamiliar with the social conventions of church worship; people can choose when and how to participate.

Other related points:

- Have one physical and one online service each week
- The Question Night should become a regular thing, which would attract a following, perhaps addressing specific topical issues; podcasts and other discussion groups could also build on this
- Can we draw on the skills of our tech-savvy young people?

Online meetings and small groups (15): again, there were a number of suggestions of mixing online and face-to-face meetings. Online would be good for outreach and for publicising the work of groups such as the Sunshine Singalong. The small groups could be promoted further. One request was to communicate when, how often, and for how long groups would meet.

Elders having regular contact with districts (7): but we should re-think the role of the elder in communicating with and supporting our members, and clarify expectations. Perhaps regular contact should be by phone / email with visits where requested or required.

Continue to work with other churches and groups to meet community needs, and use social media to communicate with the community (6).

Provide more material through the website for personal reflection and study, e.g. a daily reflection, podcasts, study guides, daily Bible readings, sermon summaries (3).

Other points mentioned:

- Continue the phone-in facility
- Offer community open days for the church and Cross House
- Look at how to retain and support volunteers in our various supportive services.

3. What do you think will be the most significant changes in our community as a result of the pandemic and the lockdown?

Improved community spirit / mutual support (13).

Increased financial problems (12): including unemployment, poverty, debt and homelessness, which may increase the strain on the Foodbank and reduce giving to the church.

Less close social contact (11): continued social distancing and/or fear of close contact may lead to reduced attendance at public events, especially among the elderly.

More working from home (9): this will include more church business being done online. One spin-off will be reduced traffic and pollution. There were also 2 comments about the need to encourage greener lifestyles.

More mental health and relationship problems (6).

Greater appreciation of keyworkers and public services (4).

Greater openness to the church's message (3).

Greater appreciation of our environment (2).

Negative impact on young people of being away from school for so long (2).

More awareness of choice in appraising how busy we really want to be (2).

Other comments:

- Negative perception of a move to a care home
- Loss of tourist income
- Need to support those who struggle with technology
- Better funding for social care
- No community singing or wind instruments for the near future
- Likely that old habits will resurface, leading to little change for the long term.

4. If there's no going back to the way things were before, what other bold thoughts should we now start thinking?

Responses here were many and very varied indeed! I have tried to group them while being consistent with what people said.

Make the church a more flexible space (12): almost all proposed replacing the pews with movable chairs (more easily cleaned and adapted). Other suggestions included improving the plumbing for tea/coffee etc, provide more for a faith-based experience for visitors (increased shop area, guidebooks), re-position the font, run a 'Buy a chair' campaign. Every church will have to justify keeping its building: increased and varied use would be a powerful argument. "Some of the things we are most used to are the things that outsiders find off-putting." "This would be all about making the church a place where more people would want to come."

Invest in Cross House (7): make it a lively and accessible community hub. Specific suggestions included a meeting place, a business hub, a music studio, meeting rooms and catering facilities; upgraded toilets and dishwasher; a community ethos rather than random lets.

Other buildings-related individual comments were:

- Buildings may not be as central as we thought – can we share ownership / responsibility with other organisations?
- Does Linlithgow need 4 Protestant churches, each with their own buildings?
- The building is not the church
- Buy and develop the High St gap site to create a more accessible space for our community.

Worship-related comments (9 in total):

- meet in different places, including open-air or drive-in services;
- move to a single Sunday service (impossible to deep-clean between 2 services);
- online services could be midweek and could link with community themes or groups such as Burgh Beautiful;
- resume Springfield when we can;
- have an evening Time of Stillness;
- use individual cups for Communion.

Review how we work and our priorities (7 responses in total):

- renew our vision and our commitment to continuous reform
- reform our governance ("Do we need to have Kirk Session in Cross House for 80 people every month?")
- re-state expectations of the relationship between elders/visitors and members
- work with other churches to be a centre of support for the whole town
- capitalise on the skills and commitment revealed by the vacancy and the pandemic
- keep investing in new technology (and supporting people to use it)
- re-starting children's and youth activities will require a new focus on finding volunteers
- "Don't let old fogeys like me veto all innovation."

Renewed focus on faith essentials (4 responses in total):

- Restore those things that were good (physical togetherness, singing, meeting for meals or coffee)
- Be bold and ready in outreach – people will be more receptive to Jesus’ message
- Renewed focus on Bible study, prayer and learning to share the joy of our faith.

Other comments:

- New focus on being an Eco church and on the Sustainable Development Goals
- Organise a civic reception for the Linlithgow Coronavirus Support volunteers
- Encourage the Church nationally to lobby the Government re the hospital / care home divide
- Install a moving stairway up the Kirkgate, part-funded by Historic Environment Scotland and powered by solar power from the church roof.

5. [For Session teams] In your area of responsibility, what should we now prioritise / do differently / stop doing?

I summarise here the comments that are specific to each team’s remit – wider comments are reflected elsewhere.

Communication

- Continue with Crosswind (reaches those with no internet access)
- Build on the interest generated by our online worship – streaming ‘standard’ worship from the church may be less appealing
- Expand the team involved in producing the online services
- Resolve the confusion between the Facebook page and group.

Education

- Children need groups that actually meet as well as online engagement
- Improve support for church groups – on-going, not just annual visits
- Source individual or small group resources for adult study.

Mission & Outreach

- Focus on connecting with the many new people joining online services (invite to small groups, open up for questions, revitalise ‘Connect’, contact details on screen for questions or further info; issue-based groups)
- Be more forthright about our faith
- Less meetings! But also more joint working by Session teams.

Music and Worship

- It will be impossible to deep-clean the church between 2 morning services – 1 service will be necessary once public worship resumes
- Increase use of the Kirk Hall for occasional services in different styles
- Explore other types of service: online Songs of Praise, socially distanced outdoor worship or drive-in worship, midweek online worship.

Pastoral Care

- Home Communion will be as important, if not more so, but will need to take account of the vulnerability of many recipients (and some helpers)
- Bereavement ministry has been very necessary
- The biggest problem has been the inability to do post-funeral visiting.

Property

- Need to articulate an updated 5 year vision and to prioritise major projects into a rolling programme
- Replace church heating with an eco-friendly system, possibly through a competition, and the seating
- New kitchen in Cross House a priority for a post-Covid 19 community.

Social Justice

- Engage with other churches and community organisations and our councillors to identify and meet local needs
- Possible examples – a lunch club for Foodbank clients; involve those currently out of work; support people to access online resources
- Promote Cross House as a base for social enterprise – a community café / lunch facility.

Stewardship & Finance

- We need to be cleverer at taking money – more electronic means including contactless and card payments by phone
- Cross House letting income will be reduced; cleaning requirements will be difficult and the toilets are now totally inadequate.

Conclusion

Reviewing and summarising these comments has been a fascinating (if time-consuming!) exercise.

Having asked for comments, the onus is now on us to consider these responses, perhaps alongside the outputs from the 2030 process, as we start to develop our vision for St Michael's going forward.

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30 June 2020