



How Religious Communities Locally Responded to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Name of Religious Tradition: Christianity

Location: Lillington, Warwickshire

Place of Worship: St Mary Magdalene Church

During the Pandemic, the main changes to our ways of worshipping were:

- Church of England (Anglican) churches in Coventry and Warwickshire are in the **Diocese of Coventry** [a 'diocese' is an area under the control of a '**bishop**'].
- Because the Church of England is 'established' [connected with the Queen and the Government], it has to obey many church laws – unlike other 'denominations' [types of Christianity]. These laws decide:
 - the services and ceremonies which churches should hold;
 - how each church should decide its finances and policies
 - what its priests and other local church leaders can and cannot do.
- When the pandemic came, the **Bishop of Coventry** started to contact all the parishes regularly and to send videos of him talking to keep their spirits up at this difficult time. An **archdeacon** [a senior priest below the bishop but above the local churches] studies all the lockdown rules from Church headquarters (in London) and the Government and send updates to the local churches. The Bishop also had to use his powers to change some of the rules – for instance, to say that churches did not have to hold all its normal services.
- Most local churches started to broadcast services (pre-recorded or live) online – it was very difficult if the church did not have technologically skilled priests or members! When entering a church building was not allowed, priests broadcast from their homes (even the Archbishop of Canterbury led one service from his kitchen!). When the rules were relaxed, during last summer and early autumn, small numbers of people were allowed to go to church again - but had to wear masks, wash their hands and sit far apart (except for families and 'bubbles'). So, services have been online OR in church OR both at the same time.

Coventry SACRE & Warwickshire SACRE

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- As well as Sunday services, it was necessary to decide whether church marriages and funerals could be held (funerals have never been stopped – but the number of people going has been reduced, and sometimes only family members could attend).
- The diocese has recorded and sent out many services and sermons [religious talks during services] which local churches could use to save work for the priests; they have had to work hard at doing online services **and** helping to run projects to support local people with food or emotional support, or just regular telephone chats during the lockdown. The services include ones for Christmas and Lent [the six weeks in the spring when Christians pray more and think about their own behaviour in the light of Jesus' death] and Easter.
- The Bishop had to make special rules to allow online meetings for each Parochial Church Council [a group of church members who run the church together with the priest] – there is nothing about pandemics in the normal rules! The annual meeting for all the church's members [the APCM] should happen before 30th April each year – but the Bishop allowed it to be delayed until October in 2020.
- At St Mary Magdalene's Parish Church in Lillington, Leamington Spa, As soon as the lockdown started, the **Vicar** [the priest who is paid to run the church] realised that he needed to provide online services to keep church members together and to help them to face their problems and fears at this time through their faith in Jesus Christ.
- A very clever church member with advanced computer skills took the lead in creating a system to broadcast services which people could watch 'live' or 'catch up' later. Other people who normally gave a talk, led the prayers or read a Bible passage started to pre-record and upload their contributions; this stopped the services being boring 'one-person shows'.
- As well as a Sunday service, people can also watch (on the parish website) a service on Wednesday mornings and also two short evening services on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Surprisingly, people who didn't come to church before the pandemic – both in Lillington and other places – have started watching; more people seemed to have watched online than used to attend in person. This may be because many people are nervous about going into a church if they are not used to it.
- The Vicar had to think up special ways of celebrating Christian festivals – particularly last **Christmas**. In 2019, the church had held

two **Christingle services** for children and families on Christmas Eve, which nearly 800 people attended. [A 'Christingle' is an orange with a candle fixed in it, dried fruit on cocktail sticks and a ribbon round the middle – it is used to teach about God and Jesus.] In 2020, the church had seven Christingle services, all the same, which people had to book to attend, and then sit separately in family groups. Not nearly so many people came as the year before.

- In the third lockdown (at the start of 2021), churches were allowed to hold 'safe' services - but most of them, including Lillington, decided to be only online. The Vicar had the idea of using the **churchyard** [the ground round a church where people are buried] to help people to trust God and pray to him. A church member who is good at craft set up five 'bases' which people and families could visit safely in the open air at any time. There they could leave short prayers for ill people on elastic plasters; use a globe to help them pray for different parts of the world, and so on.
- To focus on **Lent** [the six weeks in the spring when Christians pray more and think about their own behaviour in the light of Jesus' death], a cross is being placed along a churchyard path each day to reflect important events in Jesus' life and the life of the local community.

During the Pandemic, the ways in which our religious community reached out to the local community were:

- Although only some children have been at school all the time, the officers in the Diocese who look after church schools have planned assemblies for teachers to use or sent out pre-recorded ones. These may have been broadcast to pupils at home as well as used in schools.
- The other big job was to support anyone in Lillington - particularly the elderly, the disabled and long-term ill - who might need food or medicines brought to them because they were not supposed to go out and risk catching the Coronavirus. Because some people could not earn money (when pubs, restaurants and some shops were closed), foodbanks were needed even more; so church members and other local people were invited to donate food (things which lasted for a

time such as tins, packets of pasta, tea and coffee, soap and so on). They put these items in a box next to the Vicar's house – and the food was taken to a local foodbank once a week. An emergency fund was also set up - with donations by people who could afford it - to help out when someone was in real difficulties (perhaps to buy cookers, fridges, beds and other things which every home needs).