

Dear Friends,

It is hard to realise that we have been dealing with lockdowns and living with the threat of Covid for a year. There are signs of normality with schools reopening and cause for hope with the massive vaccination programme. I constantly thank God for the efforts of everyone who has made this possible.

One radio commentator recently was speaking about China, where schools had returned prior to our schools reopening, but where new billion-dollar companies are still providing online education and developing the use of AI (artificial intelligence) teaching assistants to make up the shortage of teachers in China. There is also a shortage of doctors in China, and so perhaps new technologies will be harnessed to support healthcare too. All in all, the pandemic has accelerated change in the use of technology in China and pundits are beginning to ask whether the West will follow these trends. For example, will new patterns of consulting our GP continue into the future? Will schools and universities abandon online learning?

Informal discussions will have already begun in many places about church life in the UK 'when this is all over'. It is hard to think that it will be 'business as usual' and naive to assume that nothing has changed. Will our volunteers still be prepared to spend time travelling across the Circuit, District or Connexion for meetings that can be done online so effectively? Will Bible study, discipleship and support groups continue to use online technologies? For example, I have been offered a course called 'The New Testament You Never Knew', led by N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, both of whose books I have enjoyed reading. Why would someone who wishes to grow in their knowledge of the Bible not make use of technology to do so in the comfort of their own home?

Nevertheless, many people do long for renewed in-person fellowship, as restrictions are loosened. A Zoom call is a poor substitute for a hug from the grandchildren, and the enjoyment of being part of a crowd in a cinema, theatre, stadium, or church seems to be deep rooted in most people. And so, I am intrigued to observe what will change and what will remain basically the same.

As I prepare to start my sabbatical on 27th March, I can scarcely believe that I have been writing these weekly pastoral emails for a year. I do hope that, as I have tried to change the style and approach from time to time, I have kept the

attention of my readers. I am grateful to Revd. David Faulkner, who will act as Superintendent in my absence, and who has arranged a rota of ministers to pen the pastoral emails. My thanks also, to everyone who has offered to write.

A letter that I have received recently has been good to receive and has encouraged me greatly. It came following the visit of the Vice President of Conference following her virtual visit to the Circuit. On the front of the card, printed in Celtic style, are the words attributed to John Wesley: *'The best of all is, God is with us.'* On the inside there is printed Isaiah 43:18-19. *'Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.'* And then in handwriting I read: *'Dear Keith, I just wanted to thank you for your help & support over the past weekend for my district 'visit'. It was so encouraging & inspiring to hear about the work in the Wey Valley & at the University. I pray that you will know God's strength, wisdom & blessing in your ongoing ministry. Blessings, Carolyn'*. Isn't it good to be reminded of the strength we derive from being part of the wider family of the Methodist Church in Britain, and that we belong to something greater than our local setting?

I have been saddened this week by the passing away of Frances Roberts. Frances was a minister's widow, local preacher, and member of Stoughton Methodist Church who also enjoyed fellowship with friends at St Mary's. She was also a beloved mother, grandmother, sincere Christian lady, and proud Yorkshire woman. Frances will be sadly missed by all her family and friends and she leaves a lovely influence.

God bless you,

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister