

COVID 19

A Time for Parishes to Ramp Up or Slow Down?

(An interview by the Divine Renovation E-Team that certainly offers our parishes inspiration - and a few challenges....).

*Many parishes over the last few weeks, not knowing how to respond to the crisis, have shut up shop for several months, waiting till the situation returns to "normal". While there may be a temptation to hibernate through this season, we have been hearing from parishes who have realised that **more** needs to be done to keep parishioners connected and reach out beyond the parish than ever before. We talked to **Fr Philip Conner** and **Lisa Vallente-Osborne** from **St Joseph's, Lancaster** to hear about what they are doing...*

Parishes seem to be in one of two states right now: either hibernation, or increased energy and reaching out. Why have you chosen the latter?

Fr Philip: From the very beginning we had a sense that we had to move fast and we had a sense that this Covid crisis could go on for a very long time. Therefore there was a need to ensure in the first instance that no one in the parish felt abandoned by the Church, and secondly there was a need to re-orientate the whole parish towards a new missionary outlook, capable of both sustaining the parish and reaching out to the wider community, particularly those who were afraid and lost at this time.

What have you moved online, and what is the impact you're seeing?

Lisa: Our main Facebook page is the central constant heartbeat of communal prayer: we mobilised daily Adoration, Mass and a 6pm thought for the day or Divine Mercy on livestream from early on. In addition, we have Facebook ministry sub-groups: a Children's Corner (an interactive RE lesson based on the scripture of the day), a Prayer Corner (teaching about how to pray and sharing experiences), Liturgy of the Word group (bringing the Scripture of the day alive with Lectio Divina), a Music Ministry group (teaching people how to pray through music, both praise and worship, and more traditional). We also have an outreach service of Guardian Angels (an army of phone 'befrienders', phone 'prayer buddies' and physical errand runners with access to the foodbanks and our own Food Club. The prayer angels also pray for the sick and parish intentions, with weekly Zoom prayer sessions (usually the Rosary). While it is challenging to sing together on Zoom, our choir are working on pieces individually, which a tech member then edits together on YouTube.

Normally, our weekend attendance at Mass is 150. We now have over 1,000 regular Facebook followers, and our Maundy Thursday Mass reached 15,000 people, while a normal weekday Mass reaches 2,500. We've had people join us from South America, China, South Africa, and India. We have made connections with Anglican and Orthodox churches too, with local Anglican churches joining us virtually for Easter.

Fr Philip: From initial panic and paralysis I am amazed at what has happened to the parish in such a short amount of time. We have been running Alpha courses for a couple of years now, but through this Covid crisis the whole parish has now taken onto itself the profile of Alpha: outward-looking, welcoming, hospitable, missionary. Before this whole Covid crisis blew up, I had been labouring as to how to express vision in the parish and how to speak of it more prophetically in the parish. To my amazement I see the parish witnessing to the vision which I had been unable to express! The numbers of leaders that have stepped up, the numbers of volunteers, the depth of prayer and faith sharing that is going on, has truly been a work of the Holy Spirit. One lady who is not of our parish and found us through the internet wrote to me these moving words: 'St Joseph's church and its family is certainly helping me to reflect on all that is good and needed and I feel alive, awake and spiritually inspired and moved. I think most of us were expecting a most barren of Easters, but, no, it has proved to be the most fruitful because of what your Church has lived out'. In addition to moving all our ministries and services online and generating life through our Facebook Groups and Guardian Angel initiative, we have partnered with our Food Club and with the City Council and deal with direct referrals with those who need assistance or food. We are beginning to deal with people now who have had no prior connection to the Church but who, I hope, are finding a Church full of compassion and mercy.

How will your parish be changed once you are able to gather in person again? Will this have long-lasting impact?

Lisa: We will make arrangements to permanently stream Sunday Mass as our own housebound and sick have found this comforting and helpful. Our Facebook ministry groups will continue and we will probably develop more. The Holy Spirit has led us this far, he will continue to! We have more active disciples and leaders within the parish, all with the same purpose... waking up others and making more disciples. Our sense of a faith-filled community has never been stronger!