



Following the golden threads

Responses from our shared discernment process



Dear brothers and sisters,

I cannot thank you all enough for your willingness to share in our listening and discerning process over these past three months. In a time when so many difficult and unusual things have been battling for our attention, it is wonderful that through it all we have kept hold of our determination to listen to God and to each other. This is a sign of our commitment to Christ as our head and to one another as our family of faith and it makes me very proud - thank you.

Our wonderful Reading Group has been busy again, carefully poring over every word of every response we have received during our second conversation loop, as well as some further reflections from loop one which in came after the first deadline - nothing has been missed or omitted. The group has noticed some new themes coming out of this second round of discussions. These are:

- Discernment: God is helping us to leave aside our positions and preconceptions and to be open to critical reflection
- Patience: We don't yet know where God is leading us and we need to stay with these questions
- Practice: God is helping us to turn our discernment into action
- Engagement: God is moving us to engage more deeply with one another

In addition to these new 'golden threads', the reading group also found that our second conversation loop reinforced and developed many of the things we heard in the first round of discussions. You can read about these emerging and more familiar themes below, as well as reading some reflections from the Reading Group. I am enormously grateful to them for their



diligence and care in this important task.

It has been an incredible privilege to read your responses to these crucial questions and, although this more formal phase of our listening and discerning conversations is now coming to a close, I would like to encourage you to stay with them, to revisit them from time to time as you explore God's call to mission locally:

- **What are we noticing...**
of God's movement at this difficult time?
- **What are we learning...**
as we reflect on how God seems to be moving?
- **What might we let go of or allow to die...**
so that we may enter a new future with God?

It would also help me and the Senior Team if you would remind us from time to time about these questions and your answers to them as we work with you to better shape our diocese for a flourishing future.

Be assured of my prayers for you all as we approach Advent season - a time of waiting in darkness for the coming light of Christ, a time of joyful expectation and hope in the promises of God.

With Blessings,

+ Rose Dover

**Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin,
Bishop of Dover**

23 November 2020





“I think God is breaking the church as we have known it but in the same way Jesus breaks bread – so everyone gets some. It might be an uncomfortable process, but it will be well worth it.”

Response from Conversation Loop 1

Emerging themes



New reflections from Loop 2

A stronger spirit of discernment

Where we have asked the lead question (“What are we noticing?”) and left aside our positions and preconceptions (as best we can), a recognisable spirit of discernment has emerged:

"We are noticing that the effect of the pandemic has been like a tide going out revealing some things we have known about before but not paid enough attention to and other things that we didn't know."

A group of four friends offered a beautiful reflection which began:

"...we visualised a physical walk with Jesus into a peaceful garden where we sat together with him and realised his presence remaining with us throughout our conversation."

These friends spoke of

"'JOY' and the characteristic of God it brought to mind was inclusivity. We felt that the Anglican Church had become too cautious about change and too worried about money... Our closing prayers reflected on how refreshed and spiritually fed we felt and we asked for grace to continue the discernment process."

This is the spirit of discernment. It is by no means that pain and difficulty is avoided. But God's presence always leads to peace and joy in the midst. How may we continue to listen in this way? "Lord, open our ears and eyes". Some new threads relate closely to the spirit of discernment.





God is asking us to be patient

A new emphasis in Loop 2 is that we have identified some important questions, but we don't know where they are leading us yet. We need to stay with them.

"...from the responses received we want to discern what God is saying and wants us to do but that it is too early to do so with any confidence at this point. This leads to the need for patience in this process."

Again, discernment, rather than being a consultation or a piece of research, is an ongoing process, a shared vocation. Yet...

God is helping us to put our discernment into practice

There are some more concrete ideas and steps being taken, with a sense that this will build. Here is one example of a church discerning in its present moment and context:

"We have heavily invested in bringing the buildings up to 21st Century but now realise that our energies and focus must also be in the virtual domain and provision for those who can't access the building for whatever reason. We are having to become more creative and resourceful."

God is moving us to engage with each other

While engaging with others remains hard in the pandemic, there are references to deeper relationship across Benefices, Team Ministries, and localities among the denominations.

"There seems to be a blanket of unity and we are all going to benefit."





What we continue to hear

...and need to stay with

Children & Young People

Whose voices is God asking us to hear?

It is notable that this time there were more responses relating to children and young people (21, although all of these are adults speaking for children and young people). The picture is complicated. For some, up to half, it is presently easier to trace God's movement:

"It's become easier for young people, and others, to invite their friends to church: more accessible, and less scary than walking through the church door." (Referring to online worship)

The other half lament missing children, finding them averse to online worship. They grieve the loss of connection and relationship, and are wondering how to restore this. There is a sense among some that those initially engaged in this group through Zoom are now slipping away.

The Reading Group reflected in depth on what they found on this thread. We offer a little of this here to help and inspire local discernment:

"We need to create a culture of listening to those who are not the same as ourselves – children, young people, schools, and the unchurched in general."

"Head Teachers in our church schools are now saying things like, 'School is the Church on the streets' and 'It feels like the walls have come down and School is now the church hub'."

What does this suggest for the potential of the local church-local school relationship? For the significance of listening in mission today? Which other voices do we need to hear? For example, one visually impaired person rejoiced:

"I can see doubly better than before – with video and written sermon text, I can take it all in; my laptop reads it to me and I can see the worship leader/preacher close up."

Imagine that!





People

God is showing us that we encounter him through people and relationships.

"Some in our group of parishes continue to focus on ways and opportunities of working together as a benefice outside of the church building, with the emphasis on relationship. The feedback about God reshaping our priorities resonates with us, and the idea of a church being a hub rather than a Sunday sanctuary."

Mission is always about relationship with people not presently in the Church.

Simplicity

God is helping us to notice him (and others) more

"Need to slow down! Leadership is about deciding what NOT to do."

Simplicity is again a clear theme - there is a real sense that we don't want to be so busy, and we don't want church to make us so busy. Fewer meetings, simpler worship, less formality, more interactivity.

Creation

God is catching our attention through his Creation – and showing us our need to care for it

"I've slowed down and had the time to notice the environment more and the wonderful detail that has always been there yet I've been too busy to notice."

The sense of encountering God in nature is still present, but perhaps less clearly. We might wonder if lives have again become busier in many cases at this stage of the pandemic?





Faith & Renewal

God is helping us to grow as people and disciples

"There's been a paring down, a stripping away 'removing the layers of old wallpaper' to reveal the underlying architecture in all its beauty. It's all become more personal."

There is again a weight of material in this thread calling for our attention. In the context of accelerated spiritual growth, way beyond normal:

"People who have made small steps have been caught by the gust of the Spirit."

The same church went on to say, not without a sense of sadness and pain,

"We are seeing a stronger core, but a larger fringe."

Others respond vividly:

"Let's kick over a few tables and get back to a purer form of Faith."

This is not about leaving traditional practices behind; rather some are being rediscovered or deepened:

"Embracing the simple discipline of MP and EP – plunging into more Scripture than ever before."

Rather, it is that faith is becoming more integrated with the whole of life:

"God has been with me all the time."

In response to what we might let go of, and focusing one of the sharpest issues when we are serious about discernment:

"All our plans, schedules, programmes and the kind of prayers that say, 'We have decided that God should bless what we are doing because we planned it'."





Church & Buildings

God is reshaping our priorities

"Is God winnowing the Church?"

"...Church is more relaxed, inclusive and fun - church with no walls or boundaries and the preconceptions of what church is, or isn't has gone. It's just people - church is not the building, it's the people."

The word 'winnowing' was used twice from different sources. It is a metaphor which, in question form, could be carried forward. What does it feel like to be winnowed? Would we ever allow ourselves to be winnowed? How does winnowing relate to the gospel pattern of dying and rising?

Here we look again carefully at the issue of church buildings. In Loop 1, (when 'church building' statements made simply in passing are removed from the total) 72% of references were either strongly or mildly critical of the effect church buildings on mission, and only 8.5% were clearly affirming.

This time there were rather more responses articulating the value of the church building spiritually and locally. Some were desperate to get back. Examples included that the building has been missed, as a context for Holy Communion, or as a place of pilgrimage or encounter with God. Here is a lovely example:

"I think the building has just that extra little something special. Hundreds of years of people praying and taking part in events just creates that whole bigger picture presence like a big hug from our Father and, from the same church it feels like all the love and worship and prayer that has gone on inside it over its life are imprinted in the walls for us to feel every time we go in - it wraps round us like a great big hug."

"I feel special every time I leave the rail. It's the fellowship as much as communion."

Even so, in Loop 2 there were still rather more 'negative' statements. Here's one rather straightforward example:

"Let the building fall down."





Of the 27 direct references to the value of church buildings in Loop 2, 29.6% were 'positive', 40.7% were 'negative' and 29.6% were 'balanced' statements. (In Loop 1, only 8.5% were clearly positive statements.)

For the sake of completeness: in Loop 2, there were 57 references to church/church buildings. Of these, 8 were positive, 11 were negative, and 8 were 'balanced'. The rest were either repeated references from the same source (treated as a single reference for this purpose) or in-passing references.

However this serves once more only to focus the nature of discernment. Discernment is not the same as position-taking. Discernment is first a local question, in a context. 'Is God working/moving/present through this building, and if so, how?' There can be surprises both ways. One's 'position' (either way) might be just that. As with all discernment, statements with question marks, and those which refer to how God, is or might be, at work, are the ones to ponder.

Change

**God has been changing us
(and stretching our capacity for change)**

"...perhaps the epidemic is acting as a catalyst in speeding up that process of change. One of the best things that has happened is that as we are humbled by the challenges we lose some of our pride."

Flexibility and adaptability are seen as a surprising plus. Part of this is a stronger note than in Loop 1 that church structures, at national and diocesan level, need attention – in the Responses, they are not seen as life-giving.

"...how in the church we are obsessed with following rules...the central church wasn't helping or supporting but just felt like another need in the midst of this crisis."

Neither this 'structural' nor the related 'decentralising' theme were numerous among the Responses, but here is a clear example of the latter:

"Freeing the church from the heavyweight obligations of the inherited superstructure of the C of E is not only necessary in terms of what we can afford (financially) to support, but also in the release of the whole people of God in mission in the world."





Money and church finance were, once again, not a discernible thread (there were only eight references in total to money/finance/Share; only one of these was directly critical – of Parish Share).

Online Church

Online worship has been like an epiphany for some ('life changing'), and deeply frustrating for others. To generalise, the majority of the Responses suggest connecting online has been liberating.

"God's presence being felt at the daily Zoom prayers each day."

Online prayer - often Morning and Evening Prayer - have been a great blessing, in some cases along with Bible study. Feelings range from fun, relief, delight – to frustration, sadness and loss.

Again, as in Loop 1, there is a note of surprise – that some we thought would be connected to church are not, with a sense of loss even grief; that there are delightful surprises, such as the number of families regularly connecting.

A significant minority in the responses are deeply pained by not being able to gather. All are aware that many are not engaging online and are simply out of touch. There is a kind of 'all or nothing' pattern in the responses:

"Members of all ages either maintaining good interaction and connectivity OR virtually none, including those previously considered core members."

Pastoral care of those who can't or won't be online remains a challenge; no solutions are offered.



The final thread is offered as a kind of summary of all the threads. It is another metaphor:





Inside Out

**God has been turning
his Church towards the world**

"Maybe we should not be asking, 'How do we get more people into the Church, but how do we get the church out to the people.'"

The hypothesis that 'God has been extroverting his Church' is something to be deeply curious about. Some now frame this as a response to the 'let go?' question:

"Don't rely on church/Sunday worship instead rely on God, it's His mission!"

"Let go of an unwillingness to change so we can rediscover the essentials of our purpose and DNA for mission and ministry."

Some connect with Loop 1 material:

"Some in our group of parishes continue to focus on ways and opportunities of working together as a benefice outside of the church building, with the emphasis on relationship. The feedback about God reshaping our priorities resonates with us, and the idea of a church being a hub rather than a Sunday sanctuary."

Some balance the use of the church building in mission and the need to work beyond it:

"In some areas the church becoming the centre of the community and providing help for those most in need. Having to move outside the church building and become more connected with the local community by using online messaging and social media."





Reflections from the Reading Group



Some theological questions

True discernment (even when very challenging, such as a call to repentance) is always 'good news'.

Is what we have recorded here and for Loop 1 'too positive'? The task here has been to discern the main threads as faithfully as possible – this is the result.

However, there is some sense in Loop 2 we are starting to grapple with the inherent theological questions around the pandemic, and its effects on us personally and as the Church. There is little about the global community and hardly anything about the global Church. There is still relatively little about lament, grief and tragedy. Here is a good example, however:

"We also noticed the pain we feel over those who have seemingly drifted away from face to face or online church, and the questions we are carrying because of this. The same for those children and families we are struggling to keep contact with, and who are not engaged with online meetings... we want to acknowledge the questions, pain and sadness as well as our sense of God's activity."

Such noticing is profoundly part of discernment. It may help us to articulate those people or places in which God appears not to be at work presently, and to hold this as a kind of prayer.

Discernment involves waiting patiently with mystery. Above all our discernment is Christian: we will 'know' more as we contemplate the person and pattern of Christ:

"Death and resurrection are the pattern of Christ. There is hope in the death of church patterns and structures that no longer meet the needs of mission. There may be pain in losing buildings, organisational structures and cherished practices, but if these lead on to resurrection in new ways of being church which is life giving and Christlike this is to be welcomed."

This is why our third question, 'What might we let go of..?' must be asked. The surprise is that what we think we might need to let go of, and the things God might want us to let go of, are not always the same!





Who are we listening to?

The Reading Group formed the question, "Who are we listening to?" Our difficulty in hearing from children, young people and their families is notable.

Against this should be held the observations made about schools and the testimony of head teachers. God is working, too often unnoticed by local churches, in church (and other) schools. What might happen if school communities – children and staff – are listened into free speech regarding the presence and activity of God in their midst? What if local churches could join the conversation?

Kairos, today, now

Is discernment for the reflectors, leaving the activists to get on with it? That is not the line Jesus took with Martha, who was told that the one, better thing was to listen to what he said. But as the saints insist, contemplation always leads to action. When discernment takes root, so that we can also say, 'It seems good to us and the Holy Spirit', then what we have discerned must shape our priorities and our actions. The context in which this is true must be the local. We should do all we can to nurture the spirit of discernment:

"Our closing prayers reflected on how refreshed and spiritually fed we felt and we asked for grace to continue the discernment process."

May the listening and discerning continue.

