

The Vicarage,
14C Christchurch Park
Sutton SM2 5TN
020 8642 2757
Vicar@Suttonteamministry.org



Christ Church, Sutton
'To follow Christ and lead others to him'

What are we going back to?

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We've all found at least some aspects of life difficult in the last few months. Illness, separation from loved ones, loneliness, bereavement, unemployment (or indefinite furlough, which can feel very similar), over-work, disruption to education, tensions in relationships, plans cancelled or postponed. Our routines have been disrupted, complicated, or taken from us. Our daily lives have been subject to government announcement. We've had the constant background consideration of how the virus is spreading, what the latest lockdown rules are, and how long they'll last. Our worshipping life has been drastically altered and will continue to be compromised for some time yet.

I am deeply grateful for the ways in which people in our church community have grown in fellowship with one another in the last few months, even as we have been unable to worship in the church building together. As ever, those who have sought, have found- that Jesus is present with us, ruling the universe, and still gently insisting that the way only to life is by laying our lives down before him.

The extended pause of our normal function together has given me a break to look back over the last few years, and to think about the future- to refresh the vision of who we are as a church, and what shape my ministry will take. I have some clear thoughts about that, which are why I'm writing to you. But first, a recap.

Looking back with gratitude

It's now been four years since Jenny, Adam, Sophie and I moved into Christchurch Park. I've been very grateful that Christ Church has been such a gracious and patient community for me to learn pastoral ministry. Vicars tend to be a bit like goalkeepers- all being well, we get better as we get older.

There have been numerous blessings in this time. People have joined our church and found friendship and fellowship. We have had some people come to faith in Christ, and many others have heard the good news of Jesus. Our Sunday worship is consistent and biblical. We have a renewed emphasis on Bible preaching; people have read and heard passages preached on that they will have never heard before. We have a growing Junior Church. We have an increasingly international congregation. These are things to be tremendously grateful for- may God take the glory for all these things.

We have had structural changes- Sutton Team Ministry now exists only in name, and in time we will be reconstituted as a Parish in our own right. Since summer 2018 I have been able to focus my ministry at Christ Church. This has been transformative. We maintain and enjoy good relationships with St Nicholas, St Barnabas, and the wider network of churches in Sutton.

We have made some significant and vital material changes; we have opened up the front of the church to the neighbourhood with a charming hedge replacing an unsightly fence. Our church office can now be converted into a crèche and has a convenient entrance. Recently we have built a fantastic new servery, and converted our lighting to LED. Many people have given generously of their time and money for these things to happen. God has provided skilful people from within our congregation to raise money, to project manage, to work closely with contractors, to apply for faculties- again, something we can be very grateful to God for.

Alongside these special projects, I know that church life requires much effort to 'keep the show on the road'. I'm grateful for those who serve in numerous ways throughout the year, often in ways that are hard to notice.

In a society where the church (or at least, the established church) is shrinking, and Christianity is considered to be increasingly less relevant, acceptable, and true, there is a tremendous amount that we can be grateful for.

One church member wrote to me recently; *'I think the lessons learned from this extended lockdown can be embraced and enhanced. I think we have been more than surviving- I look forward to the future of Christ Church (and I haven't always been able to say this).'*

I too, look forward to the future of Christ Church. I hope you do too.

Looking forward with hope and excitement

The next season is going to change the way we 'gather' as church. It's going to be different for a while. We won't be able to rely on Sunday mornings as a 'shop window' anymore. We might not all be able to gather together at the same time.

This gives us the perfect opportunity to change our focus from being a 'gathering' church to 'going' church. Our Mission Action Plan¹ states that we want to '*grow and equip disciples of Jesus Christ for maturity, ministry and mission*'.

In this next season, I am going to make a renewed emphasis on praying, supporting, encouraging and equipping as many of you as possible to live this out. I desire that we are increasingly a church who are '**all in ministry together**'.

The 'Priesthood of all believers' is a key part of the heritage in which our church stands. **Every Christian is a minister**. We can't leave ministry to 'the professionals'. We can't let someone else 'take care of the God stuff for us'. The New Testament makes it quite clear that this is not what vicars (or licensed lay readers, or SPA's, or home group leaders) are there for. God has a different vision entirely. From Ephesians chapter 4:11-13:

'So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ'

Q: What are the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (church leaders) there for?

A: To equip the church (that's all of us!) for works of service, so that the body of Christ (that's all of us) may be built up.

Q: What happens when the body of Christ (that's all of us) is built up?

A: The church (that's all of us!) will reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Which is pretty incredible when you think about it.

Ephesians tells us that God's plan (there is no plan B) for real, heart change is the local church living and sharing the Gospel with one another and the world.

Paul gives a great image of what Christian maturity looks like in verses 14-16. He describes a life that is so rooted in God and his love, that the storms of life won't capsize us, the winds of change won't blow us off course. A life that can speak the

¹ The Mission Action Plan is: *By God's grace, we will endeavour to: 1) Grow and equip disciples of Jesus Christ for maturity, ministry and mission; 2) Grow and nurture community in South Sutton; and 3) Engage with and serve mission partnerships in our local community and the wider world.* Parts 2 and 3 of this are vital work- but not the key focus of this letter. They will be addressed in due course.

truth in love- reach out to others with the very words and love of Christ. A life that is organically connected to other believers, growing together.

We want that kind of life. And we want to help others have it as well. It really is possible to change, and it really is possible that you can be a part of that change for other people. Isn't that exciting?

Much of this exists in our church already- for which I am incredibly grateful. I believe the time has come to fan those sparks into flames in ways that are creative, engaging, and exciting, that challenge each of us.

What does being '**all together in ministry**' look like? I think the best way to explain it is to show some examples. Here are several:

Andy prays for his golfing friend Ben for months. After a conversation about Coronavirus, Andy gets hold of a Christian book on the subject. Ben reads it, and responds with some further questions. Andy invites Ben to a church 'guest service'.

Caroline and Dylan try to do Bible reading with their two children, aged 4 and 7 each day, and to talk about God with their children when they can. They don't always manage to fit it in, and attention spans are erratic, but they keep trying. They ask some friends at church to pray for endurance and patience. Their friends at church found the same thing hard when their children were young- they give a few pieces of hard-won advice, and follow up a few weeks later.

Emma has recently started coming to church, and is interested in learning more about the Bible. Faiza begins meeting with her regularly to read the Bible together and tries to answer some of Emma's questions. Faiza doesn't know all the answers to Emma's questions, but feels confident that she can go to friends and ministers at church for help and support. Faiza feels she is learning as much from the process as Emma is.

Graham has been going to home group for years, but in recent weeks has begun to prepare for the group by reading the material, and praying for his fellow members. A friend in the group seems quieter than usual, a little bit down; Graham follows up in the week to ask how he is.

Harriet's daughter loses her job; Harriet mentions this at church to Ifedimma. Ifedimma says she'll pray that her daughter finds a new job, but also asks about Harriet's own heart in that situation- is Harriet feeling anxious? How might Harriet be tempted to trust something other than Christ in the next few weeks? How might Ifedimma support and pray for her?

Jacqui has a few hours spare each week since her retirement- she gets in touch with Sutton Schools Work, to see if there are opportunities to help in some of their work in local primary schools.

Kevin notices a newcomer at church, says hello before the service, and stays to chat afterwards. Kevin asks if there was anything particular that brought her to church today. The newcomer doesn't say much, and conversation doesn't particularly flow, but Kevin remembers her name and says hello next time she comes.

Lily and Madeline are friends from church, and meet up most weeks for coffee and a natter. They usually mention church life, but don't tend to get personal. Lily asks Madeline if they might read the Bible and look at the weekly 'questions for study and reflection' together.

At the school gates, another dad mentions to Ole that he's been enjoying a television series that explores some spiritual issues. Ole has heard of it, and thought it seemed interesting. Ole asks him if he'd like to have a beer and talk about it once he's had a chance to watch it. Ole watches the series, and they get together. Ole asks about some of the questions it raises, and what his friend thinks about it. Ole knows that his friends from church are praying for him.

Pippa works in central London and mentions to her friend Rachel that she went to church at the weekend. It turns out that Rachel is a Christian too- they've been working together for years without realising. Pippa suggests they meet up one lunchtime a week to pray. After a few weeks they start to talk about who else they might invite.

Steve has an idea for how the church might make contact with a particular community group in the Parish. He mentions it to a friend, and they arrange to meet with the Vicar together to talk through the possibility.

Tamara has a new-born baby and gets to know some other local mums. She invites them to her house- a mixture of friends from church and non-Christians, from all sorts of different backgrounds. Over a few months, she gets to know them, and they begin to open up about their lives. Tamara's home group know the names of everyone who comes, and prays for them regularly.

Uriah mentions to one of the ministry team that he'd like to consider leading the church in the intercessions on a Sunday morning. He's not done anything like that before, but sits down with one of the ministry team to talk through it.

Victoria and William are a married couple who come to church together, but don't tend to talk much about God outside of church. William suggests to Victoria that they read, talk, and pray through the 'questions for study and reflection' together. It feels strange at first, but in time they find it helpful, and begin to wonder if they might join a home group together.

...You can imagine, I hope, many more besides. These are not exhaustive, but some examples of the kind of thing I'm describing.

What are the features of this kind of **'all in ministry together'**?

This kind of ministry is **personal**. All the examples show somebody assuming personal responsibility for producing ministry. The shape your ministry will take will depend on who you are, and the needs and situations of the personal relationships around you. It's not only for people who are naturally outgoing and self-confident. It's not about trying to be someone else.

This kind of ministry is **organic**. Notice how some of the examples above come through official church activity, but some don't. The church structure exists to build up the people, and not vice-versa. The purpose of these activities is not to increase the church in numbers attending on a Sunday morning, even though that may be a very welcome outcome!

This kind of ministry relies on **God's word**- that is, they involve speaking to God, speaking about God 'speaking the truth in love', listening to others. In some of the examples, physically taking a Bible out might be an immediate part of the process. In others that may be a long way away indeed! Initially it may simply be about initiating conversation, taking an interest, asking questions. But underneath it all is the conviction that God's word is life giving, the Bible is nothing to be embarrassed about, and that every Christian can share that word with others.

This kind of ministry is a **skill**- that is to say they are things we improve on with experience and practise. Our desire to reach out to others with the love of Christ is the most important factor, and we'll each do it in our own way. But there are ways we can learn to get better at doing them. There is no shortcut- we learn and grow by doing. Each of us are equipped with what we need to start, and it is almost always the case that 'having a go' is better than not trying. We have a role to play in supporting one another in growing in this. I have at least as much to learn from you in this as you do from me, but my role is to support, encourage and equip you for this.

Lastly, they are all **costly**- our lives are busy. To reach out in love to someone else takes time, may take us beyond our comfort zone, and may end in rejection. It may be that the people we reach out to choose not to engage further. We don't know if Ben got along to the guest service. We don't know if Emma ended up getting baptised or not. Harriet might have closed down conversation with Ifedimma, because she didn't want to get that personal. And so forth. That costly loving, that risk of rejection, is precisely what Jesus requires of us. It is the way of the cross, the way to life.

What isn't 'all together in ministry'?

There are some valuable and beautiful areas of church life that don't come under this category. It's important to define them, rather than assume that all church activity is all the *same kind* of ministry.

I mentioned above that there is a great amount of work done in our church life 'keeping the show on the road'- volunteering for jobs week by week, taking on roles of responsibility in the church structures, running activities, pouring coffee. These are wonderful, essential things, and help is always needed. But they aren't quite the same as being '**all together in ministry**', although they can have a significant overlap, and be great opportunities to do that kind of ministry.

It's not quite the same as 'lay leadership', either- i.e. being on the PCC, or taking other responsibilities. These things are vital and good.

It's not quite the same as vocation, either- that is, the work we do for God, in our working lives. God cares deeply that we do good work with integrity, and that too is a part of our discipleship. It can have a great overlap with 'all together in ministry' but it's not quite the same.

It's also not quite the same thing as public ministry either- things like ordination, licensed lay ministry, SPA ministry, leading services or preaching. Those are exciting things- please do speak to one of the church leadership team if any of those thoughts excite you.

So where next?

I appreciate that there is a lot of information to digest here- be assured that this will be further communicated in the weeks, months and years to come. There'll be many chances to ask questions and explore further and move at whatever pace you feel comfortable with. You will be a part of the shape this takes. If it feels a bit much, or even a bit scary, you're not alone. The FAQ's at the bottom of this letter may help.

This is a statement of intended 'direction of travel', rather than a detailed programme. **My intention is to invest a large and growing proportion of my time to encouraging and supporting you as we are 'all together in ministry'**. Some things I currently do will drop by the wayside. Others will expand appropriately. Two concrete, shorter term things:

Firstly, we will be making a new emphasis on fellowship opportunities in this new season, because much of the above simply isn't possible if we don't have chances to get to know each other, particularly for those who are newer to the church. In the current Covid climate it may be easier to do this in smaller gatherings rather than in large ones. As a first step, I'm hoping that we'll have a new weekday afternoon fellowship group meeting in church by the autumn.

Secondly, we will be running a course called 'Talking Jesus' sometime soon- date TBA. 'Talking Jesus' is a DVD/discussion group for Christians to help us talk to others about Jesus. It's great for people who want to talk to other people about faith, but find it a bit daunting, or don't always know where to start. I am in that category!

So how might you respond now?

I'd welcome any thoughts on all of the above- please do be in touch, whether your thoughts are 'about time- I can't wait to get going' or 'this all seems a bit much'- or anywhere in between.

Above all, please pray. Pray if you're not sure, pray if you can't wait to get going. Be honest with God. How do I really feel about all this? If I am resistant, why?

Pray that the vision of Ephesians 4 might be yours as well- that God may give you a fresh desire for real, genuine fellowship and maturity in Christ together.

Pray that God would help you respond to his call to move towards other people in love and truth. Where might you be called by Christ to pass through a 'comfort barrier' in some of your relationships?

Pray that we as a whole church might grow in this new focus together; that we would support and uphold each other in our desire to be 'all in ministry together'.

I heard someone say once 'the only church that illuminates is a burning one'- may this be our experience. Be assured of my prayers for each of you.

*As we gaze on your kingly brightness
So our faces display your likeness.
Ever changing from glory to glory,
Mirrored here may our lives tell your story.*

*Shine, Jesus, shine,
Fill this land with the Father's glory;
Blaze, Spirit, blaze,
Set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow,
Flood the nations with grace and mercy;
Send forth your word,
Lord, and let there be light!*

Your brother, in Christ,



FAQ's-

'Didn't someone once say 'preach the Gospel at all times, use words if you have to'? I try to live my life as a good person, why do I need to talk about faith as well?

There's a lot I like about this approach. It is true that the way we live speaks volumes. It is jarring and distressing when someone professes faith in Christ and then live in ways which undermine that same message. But ultimately this approach falls well short. If the message of Christianity was 'be a good person and come to church, and then God will love you', then being a good person and coming to church might be enough to persuade people. But if you've been coming to Christ Church for a while, you'll know that's not what Christianity is. Christianity is news, not advice- news that Jesus has won the battle for us. Christianity is not a lifestyle or code of conduct, but does lead to a changed life.

What tends to make the difference is when Christians live with integrity, generosity, hospitality, AND they also proclaim the good news of Jesus in personal, thoughtful ways. It's the combination of those two things that will truly show God's love to the people around you. Loving Jesus will draw you to do love others by doing both.

I'm not even sure I'm a Christian. Where do I fit in?

I'm so glad you're still reading! You are so welcome here. My desire (and I know many others as well in the church feel the same way) is that Christ Church is an easy place to get to know people, to find friendship and community. I hope that you have experienced that already here. We'd love to get to know you more, and we'd love to do what we can to help you explore Christianity.

One of the reasons we'd love to see you become a Christian is that we'd love you to join in all the things you've been reading about in the letter above. You can bring something to this that nobody else can bring.

I don't think I'm a strong enough Christian to do this sort of thing.

You're right. None of us are. We're all of us deeply sinful, and our faith is flaky at best. That's why we need each other. We are 'all together in ministry' in Jesus' strength, in spite of our weakness.

The difference between the army and Jesus Christ is that the army won't enlist you unless you are healthy and Jesus won't enlist you unless you are sick. What is God looking for in the world? Assistants? No. The gospel is not a help wanted ad. It is a help available ad. God is not looking for people to work for him but people who let him work mightily in and through them. (John Piper)

Are all your pastoral letters this long? Thankfully, no.