It has been a short year, as I last made a report to you as Rector in September – and that was itself a short report because of the restrictions we were operating under at the time. Since then we have been open, closed, open, closed and open again due to lockdowns, the last being a decision we took ourselves rather than had forced on us by the Government or the Church. As has been the case all through the pandemic, opinion has been divided over the best thing to do – some members of the church would have preferred it had we never shut, others were adamant we should never have reopened. There was, however, a basic consensus on the PCC both when we closed to public worship in the middle of January and when we resumed towards the end of March as the restrictions and the vaccination programme began to make a significant difference to the prevalence of the coronavirus locally.

It has all meant learning how to do new things! My basic aim has been not to try to replicate a normal Sunday morning online, but a) to maintain the church as a eucharistic community, b) to keep people in touch with one another, and c) to provide resources to help church members to stay functioning spiritually. This has meant a certain amount of grappling with technology, especially since getting a rather more up-to-date laptop and associated kit in December making it easier to livestream services. However, since real-world services have resumed very few people have used those online resources, and our kit is still too basic to produce something very slick and impressive. Of course we’re still operating under severe restrictions, even now that we are worshipping in person once again. Christmas and Easter meant devising new, short versions of what we would normally offer, especially to family groups, and the mini-Crib Services were particularly successful. I’ve been very encouraged by the fact that numbers on Sunday mornings are fairly solid – not much down on where we were before the pandemic began – and we have a considerable number of folk who have begun worshipping with us this year and they bring with them very interesting and valuable talents which may take us in new directions.

Despite the collapse in our rental income we have managed to keep going without falling too heavily into the red and I am hugely grateful to Sharon and Clare in the office for keeping an eye on our expenditure and to David for his diligent work as Treasurer, sorting out applying for furlough support and technology-related issues too, as well as everyone who has faithfully kept up their regular giving to the church and made special and very generous donations. However as activity picks up we will need to spend more and paradoxically that side of our church life may be harder for a while. Whether we will be able to carry out the development projects we identified in the last Mission Plan remains to be seen.

I mentioned people who are new to the church: as always there have been losses as well, notably Gladys Mitchell, Tim Caton, Barbara Noakes and Doreen Elson, as well as Audrey Hayler who while not a congregation member was well known as Jim’s wife. Taking their funerals, even under straitened circumstances, has been a great privilege as I’ve learned more about all these remarkable and blessed people and aspects of their lives that I knew nothing about!

Thank you everyone who has played any part in keeping us going these past months: Ray and Rhys setting up for services and looking after the building; Paul and Helen as churchwardens; Graeme marshalling servers, intercessors, and organists; Maggie and all those wonderful souls who have contributed to the recorded services which have kept us going when we couldn’t meet together in person. If I had awards to give out you’d all get one! Perhaps you should all have one of the former Mayor’s covid community support badges.

At the moment we have no new guidance from the Church of England as what we are allowed to do in services and what we aren’t, but assuming that the Government’s roadmap towards normality doesn’t slip too much we will be resuming some activities from the end of next month, though groups such as Toddlers won’t start again until the Autumn. The first priorities have to be evangelism, discipleship and community service. I think technology will enable communication and outreach but I continue to be sceptical about how far remote worship really allows people to take part in the Body of Christ which is what we are supposed to be doing. As I mentioned earlier, our ability to record our services is comparatively basic but I’m not sure it’s really worth spending a lot of time and money on what may turn out just to be a vanity project rather than actually making contact with a new audience for the Gospel. I think there’s room for an online worship community in our diet, but not something which replicates or replaces what happens face-to-face in church.

And talking about discipleship we mustn’t forget the joyful sharing of food, drink and fun things! The Christian life is serious but far from solemn and what a delight it will be when those aspects of our common life can start again.

There is, brothers and sisters, so much to do, but despite all the dislocations of the last year and a bit I am quite optimistic and enthused about the possibilities. And it takes a lot to do that!