

01 June 2021

Moving Beyond Revive Sundays

Dear St Mary's family

I think we are all longing for the news that restrictions are ending and we can fully restore our freedoms and the simple touches of healthy normality to life. Being able to travel, see loved ones, sing in church, not have to wear a mask, hug loved ones and so many other simple things are now more fully on the horizon. Thank you Lord!

Last year, when we began Revive Sundays at 9am, 11am and 5pm with various restrictions sadly imposed, we said that this would be a temporary measure. I do want to say a big thank you to everyone who has come to Revive Sundays over the past year. We have done church differently, but even with restrictions, it has been wonderful to meet, pray, encourage one another and hear God's word preached. I think two things have stood out for me as special. Firstly, the time we could spend all together with all ages and also the times when people have shared their reflections, prophetic words, scriptures and testimonies in a way we have not done before. This is something we want to keep doing. So, the adaption of Revive Sundays has taught us much, and we want to keep hold of the good we have found.

I wanted to share with you our thoughts and plans on soon moving out of Revive Sundays and back to our normal service times and the removal of restrictions. We still wait for the government and Diocese to release their guidance, and we hope the 21 June remains the date for the removal of restrictions under stage 4 of the government plan. If there are delays, we hope it will not be for too long and we will adjust accordingly.

If we assume 21 June goes ahead with restriction removal, the following Sunday is 27 June. We would propose to remain in Revive Sunday congregations, but without restrictions (so no need for masks, social distancing and we would want to be able to sing) from 27 June until 11 July. That is three Sundays in the current service times of 9am, 11am and 5pm. We felt people may not want to return too quickly to large church services all at once, so these three Sundays will help ease us back into more normality in smaller numbers.

Then from Sunday 18 July, we propose returning to services at 8:45am and 10:30am only. You would be free from only attending a service you have signed up for. You could come to either service. We will also plan to reintroduce tea and coffee after the service, prayer ministry and other ministry as we were used to. We also plan to have extended worship sessions on 18 and 25 July so we can celebrate being back together in worshipping the Lord together.

There will be no evening services from 18 July until we plant the new evening service at a date to be decided within the next 6 months. The Listening to the Church feedback consultation has a question about whether members of St Mary's are interested in joining this new congregation. It may be that those who have been part of the 5pm congregation would like to join this when it begins, and we are happy to explore that together. Everyone who indicates they are interested will be invited to a meeting to explore the possibility.

We remain very aware that Covid has not gone away and that we will be living with the virus into the future. We know that members of St Mary's will want to return at different times and paces, which is very understandable. We would encourage everyone to plan to return to church when the time is right for them. I know that this year has changed our weekend rhythms and there was something nice about church on TV in pyjamas! However, we want to remember how important it is for the people of God to come together to worship, serve and love God and one another. Over the next few weeks we will be exploring more about what it means to be church and to love the church and find joy in being together.

I love our church. No church is perfect and we have much to learn as we go forward. We have been through a tough year and we will be processing much grief over some time to come. All this means it is more important than ever for us to get back to meeting one another again and renewing rhythms of worship and church life.

I wanted to remind you of our key message for the Summer as a time for:

1. Connecting and renewing friendships
2. Spending time in prayer
3. Being renewed through rest

A few other updates:

- If you are able, do come and support Café Hope as we are now open indoors and outdoors from 9:15am-12:45pm.
- Ignite groups have restarted fortnightly at the 11am and 5pm services. We will take a break from ignite during August and then hope to be able to return to weekly ignite groups on Sundays from September.
- We are keen to listen to the church family at this time and have released a very simple set of questions for your feedback to the St Mary's leadership team. Please go to our website before 13 June, where you can fill out your answers.
- From the first Sunday without restrictions, we will be broadcasting recorded teaching in both audio and video formats from the 10:30am service only. This is due to our current capacity to upload the recordings, but online teaching will be available each week.
- Have you visited our new look website yet? It is designed to be simpler to navigate and also more focussed on people who might be looking at joining a church in the area.

I am aware this has been mostly information, rather than encouragement. Please contact me if you have any questions about this. May we be united, gracious and courageous in the coming months. *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* Matthew 11:28-29

May God richly bless you dear St Mary's,

Revd Malcolm Macdonald
Vicar