



## Annie's story

### Rev Annie Deche, Newry Methodist Church

I am humbled to share with you the journey covered since the novel coronavirus pandemic was first reported in Northern Ireland and Europe in general. This includes the lessons learnt from the changes and challenges occasioned by the virus, the promise and opportunities jointly embrace over the period.



*The Public Health Agency confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in the country on 27 February, 2020. Immediately, the church instituted measure in compliance with government guidelines aimed at reducing the spread of the virus. At the time, the mass media was awash with grim stories that pushed us all into a general state of anxiety.*

Looking back, I am encouraged and proud of the steps the church took to soulfully support the community. The decision to explore and utilise online platforms enabled the church leadership to meaningfully engagement to congregants. On 15 March, 2020 a post on the Newry Circuit Facebook page quoting Psalms 91: 10-11 was uplifting. It read: 'No harm will come to you. No sickness will come near your house. God will command His Angels to protect you wherever you go'. This has been our prayer through the days, weeks, and now months since the pandemic began.

We began livestreaming our sermons to take the gospel to the homes of our members and the community, a move that has influenced me and others positively, cheering one another with messages of hope and encouragement. At first, I did not have the confidence that I would be able to pull through with online preaching and teaching. As a matter of fact, it was a big shock for me when I was asked to present sermons live on Facebook because it's something I hadn't done before. It, therefore, took me a considerable period of time to finally agree. I immediately teamed up with the administrator of the Circuit, who has been very supportive of the Ministry – she made me an administrator of the church's Facebook account and in a short three weeks, we livestreamed our first sermon. It was a tense moment because the camera had been placed upside-down because we had no idea that it should be at an elevated position when making a livestream.

Generally, this has been a learning process, and my confident has grown by watching from my able colleague's services and webinars. I am also grateful we received a new lay preacher into our team who took up some of the services, and also circuit leaders who lead worship sessions and sermons whenever I needed a break. I will never forget our audience, the lovely music, and the lovely people of Newry, who gave us valuable feedback that improved on our presentations.

God richly blessed us with the big come back on 31st May 2020. It was great seeing members of our congregation come for the first Drive-In Service at the open space in front of Newry Methodist Church. The service was held on warm sunny day, and when the sweltering heat of the sun became unbearable, some of the congregants disembarked and sat in front of their cars till the end of the service.



listen to the preaching. These drive-in services continued for four weeks, the attendance growing even under hostile weather conditions. The thirst for God's word and fellowship was evident as numbers of congregants kept increasing. The impulses of the weather notwithstanding, God remained at the centre of our worship.

Then came the going back to church and we observed social distancing rule and this has been going on since July 5. We have indeed, appreciated the fact that during summer we have always had one joint service and this has worked perfectly well. Nevertheless, I had to cancel the baptism of a little child that had been scheduled for May 31 following the family's request to reschedule it to August 2. I was so nervous on how this would happen as we had earlier received strict guidelines on baptism during the pandemic. A second request for baptism followed which was done on July 26. It was a 'social distanced' baptism, which caused me to have butterflies in my stomach in the period preceding the event. I kept emailing my District Superintendent to advise and give guidance on an appropriate way to conduct the ceremony. In the end, guidelines were observed and the glory of God shone. It was indeed an interesting baptism service. I stood at a distance, then extended my hand and poured the first drop of water from the little tiny jug I was holding. The second was such a big drop and the baby just moved a little bit, but slept throughout the service. He woke up as I was concluding, and at the point where I was asking the congregation present to follow up and support this family to bring up the child in the ways of Christ. He sent the congregation into a roaring laughter when he popped his cute eyes open and gave me a lovely stare, which was essentially a sign of affirmation to my call for support to the family.

We are grateful that the online bible studies, church council and executive meetings, and the breakfast prayer were fountains of spiritual nourishment that made us see the goodness of the family of Christ. The true Balm of Gilead, the Lord Almighty also kept our members safe from the virus. Indeed, God kept our circuit members together, caring for one another in significant ways.

We ask God to give us his love, strength and wisdom to support elderly members of our community, who are not sure if it is still safe to return to church. Let us treat each other with empathy during this difficult period. The work of God continues and we pray for total restoration as the COVID-19 disruptions will come to pass. As has been stated by our President, we remain believers in a God whose 'Grace has no Limits'.

