



Fiona's story

Rev Fiona McCrea, Carnalea Methodist Church

I've been asked to share a little of our church's journey through lockdown, the changes and challenges we have experienced and what we're looking forward to in the weeks and months ahead.

Have you ever read the Stormie Omartian book entitled 'Just enough light for the step I'm on?' I don't think I've ever actually read the book but I have definitely quoted the title multiple times and for me it sums up how I feel about the journey of lockdown.



In CMC we have faced lockdown one step at a time and each step forward has been into the unknown but we have journeyed knowing that God goes before us, beside us, behind us and within us. The subheading of Stormie's book is 'Trusting God in the tough times' and this has been the case for our church family, we have continued to trust God through these challenging months and have sought to continue to love God and serve others throughout this time and in new ways.

As I wrote I began to list what our church family has been up to over the past few months but decided that would take too long to describe to you, so let me share some highlights with you, using the headings of the MCI commitments which continue to be at the forefront of our minds...

Warm-hearts – as part of our discipleship the congregation have received a daily devotion entitled 'Ponder, praise and pray' from Monday to Friday and on Saturday a member of the congregation has shared what God is doing in their life during lockdown. Through our zoom prayer and coffee meetings we were able to broaden this sharing to hear many stories of what God was doing in our lives and the lives of those around us and to encourage and pray for one another. Prayer continued in many different ways and we moved our bible study online and even began a book club! Many in our congregation have commented on how their faith has grown and developed over this time and how it has become a part of everyday life rather than squeezed into a Sunday!

Tough hands – pastoral visitation of our elderly and those most vulnerable switched to phonecalls, emails and texts and this care for one another extended throughout the church with the bowlers checking in on one another, the ladies group phoning each other etc. This love and care incorporated all ages and our children and young people were kept connected by our youth worker and volunteer leaders through zoom lunches, zoom YF, zoom YC and zoom bible study, we were so grateful to IMYC and the TOM team for their resources! Recognising that even our youth were tired of screens they finally decided in July to brave the elements and meet in our church car park, socially distanced on a camping chair with an umbrella (it has rained a lot during July and August!!)

One of my favourite parts of lockdown was our Sunday services which we shared with the five other churches on the Bangor and Holywood circuit, hearing different voices leading, doing prayers, readings and worship from around the circuit and including some of our older members, who can no longer attend church in person, was such a blessing. The church finally seemed to include everyone, not simply those who could come to the buildings at 11am each Sunday!



Wet feet – a few years ago we ‘adopted’ Ailsa Lodge as our nursing home in CMC and over lockdown our pastoral worker organised boxes of love to be delivered there, filled with treats and messages of love for the staff and residents. We also supported Storehouse North Down through weekly food and financial donations which a member of the congregation collected and delivered to Storehouse. This care for others extended into our whole community in very creative ways as CMC folk became Jesus’ hands and feet when shopping for those shielding, sewing PPE, baking goodies to treat neighbours, holding community quizzes and much more.

I hope you have enjoyed this whistle-stop tour of life in CMC church family over the past 6 months, the buildings may have been closed but the church was not!

So what have we learnt in this time? We have been reminded afresh of God’s goodness and faithfulness in the good times, the tough times and the uncertain times. We have been shown how God is present with us at all times and in all places, He is not restricted to a building and a certain day of the week and neither is our faith. We have learnt what the body of Christ can do when we all use our gifts and talents and have seen and heard stories of discipleship, mission and pastoral care as the church family has been empowered for service. We have seen people grow closer to God and take more ownership of their personal faith development and we have seen God at work!

What are we looking forward to? I heard this phrase yesterday... ‘we used to think we knew normal but now we are in a new normal!’ For the first few weeks I felt like we were treading water until we could go back to ‘normal’ but over the past months I have come to realise that the future will look different and that this can be exciting and hopeful. The verse I have been coming back to again and again in recent weeks is Jeremiah 6v16a...16
This is what the Lord says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.

Although I feel I have more questions than answers right now, I am trusting God that we have ‘just enough light for the step we are on’ and that he has great things planned for CMC and the community we are part of. We are at a crossroads with lots of unknowns... will we reopen our buildings, will we wait? Will our organisations start back in September or will they remain online? As a church family we are asking God where the good way is for the future of CMC and we plan to walk in it.

