

Methodist Recorder article by Martha Rand, Youth Rep to Methodist Conference

17 in lockdown

To tell the truth, I didn't really want to write about COVID-19 in my article. If you're anything like me you'll want a break from the constant talk of tiers or track and trace. However, the purpose of this article is to talk about my experience as a Rep, and it would be difficult to talk about that without mentioning COVID. Secondly, I wanted to use this opportunity to tell a story of lockdown that you might not have heard before; that of a 17-year-old and a pupil in lower 6th form last year. So here goes...

Like many at the moment, I find it crazy how much things have changed this year. In January I remember hearing on the news about a new virus in China. I watched a time-lapse on Instagram of a new hospital being built to deal with its victims. But, even in my short lifetime, things like this had happened – I remember Ebola – and it had never actually affected me before. I spent most of January and February trying to persuade my classmates that it was nothing to worry about, it was just like the flu. However, as we got into March and Italy went into lockdown, I realised we could not escape this for much longer. In Maths we were learning how to map exponential growth, and my teacher took the opportunity to use real-life data of cases in the UK to predict how it would increase in the next few weeks, then quickly took the document down, not wanting to scare us with the prediction of 2000 cases. The Head Teacher gave an assembly to Year 11, assuring them that their exams would go ahead.

Before long, people were talking about the pandemic constantly at school. Was the government right to avoid locking down? Would herd immunity work? More importantly, how much longer would schools be open? Meanwhile, at church, we were determined to stay open for services to support people's wellbeing.

On Tuesday 17th March, the secondary school where my dad teaches moved online because they didn't have enough teachers still in school. The next day I came home to be told my school had made the same decision and later that evening the government announced that all schools would close from Monday and all exams were cancelled. Having had a positive case in my church we decided to move services online. Within a week my whole family was working/studying from home.

So then began home schooling. Thankfully, my school had already started using Microsoft Teams for homework, so it was a fairly simple transition. Each of my teachers would set work roughly once a week, and it was up to me to complete it in my own time. Personally, I managed this fairly well by sticking as much as possible to my normal timetable, although there were many times this fell apart. Working independently presented many challenges; I couldn't ask my teachers for help as easily, the monotonous days made it hard to stay focused and I missed seeing my friends. However, there were some benefits. I was able to manage my own time, which allowed me to join my church's Zoom coffee morning every week and, since I didn't have to get the train to school every day, I gained nearly two hours in my day (one of which I used to sleep!). Since returning to school I have also realised how nice it was in lockdown to be able to rush through the things I found easy and spend more time on the subjects I struggle with.

Soon after school came to my bedroom, church came to our dining room. New restrictions meant it was no longer possible to stream from the church building so in the Manse services became a true family effort, with my mum preparing the service, my dad's technical skills bringing it to the world via Facebook and our combined musical talent providing the hymns. Not everyone can access the online services but it has included many people who wouldn't normally worship together. We have been joined by both old, young, friends, strangers, local people, and those living across the UK and beyond. Once we got to grips with the technology, we tried to include others, for example we asked people to send in videos of signs of hope at Easter and we regularly have other church members doing the readings.

As Reps we also had to adjust to the new situation. Zoom became a staple, as it has been for many, and since we couldn't meet up to socialise we started a weekly Zoom quiz, which has led to some hysterical moments and brought us closer as a group than ever before, as normally we only meet a few times a year. We also redoubled our efforts on social media, launching Worship Wednesday, which offered worship designed for young people, and Takeover Tuesday, where we take in turns to show our Instagram followers what we get up to for a day.

Then came the news that Conference would be online and the agenda slimmed down by postponing God In Love Unites Us. As preparations were made to move Conference to Zoom, I joined a group of Methodists who were campaigning for divestment from fossil fuels. Over a month or so we worked together to put together a Notice of Motion on the subject and it was agreed that I would propose it. Presenting to conference via Zoom was a nerve-wracking experience, especially as I knew my motion was opposed by many people with more power than me and, although I was disappointed it was deferred to Council, it was an honour to be invited to present it there. I was incredibly pleased when the motion was finally accepted in October and I hope that the Church will now treat this important issue with the urgency it deserves.

As the year went on, I spent a lot of time researching my options for university and attending virtual open days, a task which would have looked quite different without the pandemic. Learning from home probably gave me more time for research, and online open

days meant I could find out about lots of universities without spending money on travel or missing lots of school. However, it is frustrating that I will have to choose the university I will live in for the next four years having never visited it properly.

As I write this, I will turn 18 a week today which leads me to consider what my adult life will look like in this strange world. It seems the pandemic is here to stay for now at least and many of my peers feel hard done by. Young people are suffering from the measures that sacrifice our economy and education to protect the population from a disease that appears to have minimal impact on us. But, through my life in the church, I have seen how devastating this virus can be, with two members of our congregation having died and several others spending time in intensive care. I desperately want life to be back to normal, but I also know how vulnerable many of my 'extra grandparents' at church are. I also feel that the current situation in schools is inadequate, both for properly preparing us for our exams this summer, and for the purpose of preventing spread of the virus. So, what comes next? What will my university experience be like and, when I leave education, what will the job market look like? Despite all this uncertainty it has been amazing to see how the church has come together and adapted to a new way of operating. I hope that, as we move forward, the world both within and beyond the church can learn to live in a way that better respects each other and the world around us.