

# Together apart

## *Missing the 'Roses and Lilies' of our community life.*

By Sophie Sutherland, Anna Chaplain to Older People

The last time we gathered in Church for worship Paul Allton spoke to us about the many different ways in which our relationship with God and his love and care for us can be captured by the very simple words 'being with'. Drawing on Richard Carter's book *The City is my Monastery* Paul reminded us of the many ways in which we experience 'being with' God whether it's in silence or service, sacraments, sharing or sabbath time. Of course we may experience *some* of these ways of 'being with' God in solitude. But as we sat in Church, knowing it might be the last time for a while, I was struck how much being physically gathered as part of Christ's body is central to my own experience of 'being with' God in Christ.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer described fellowship in a religious community as the 'Roses and Lilies' of the Christian life and said that we only learn it's true value when we have to be apart. That's certainly a theme that's echoed through phone conversations I've had with some of you over the past days, expressing a real pain and grief that we are not able to see one another and gather in the usual way: we miss that physical aspect of 'being with' one another and God.

Some of these phone conversations reminded me of a lovely lady I used to visit when I was a curate. She'd been a member of our church choir for thirty years and had had to stop coming after a series of falls which eventually led to a long hospital stay. She felt the pain of that separation keenly and had postcards of the church pinned up around her hospital room. We had always had to take her communion in her choir stall as she was unsteady on her feet, so I used to joke that communion in hospital was an extension of that - not just a walk across the

chancel but rather a little trip up the A21. One summer's day I was reading her the Gospel from the previous Sunday. It was the passage from John's Gospel (ch 15) about Jesus being the Vine. When we got the part where it says 'you are the branches' she wept a bit. 'You are still very much in the Vine even here,' I said to reassure her. She smiled and squeezed my hand. 'I don't need you to tell me that dear' she replied. However painful the physical separation, however much she missed her friends she was absolutely confident that she was still firmly rooted in our little part of the Body of Christ. Nothing and no-one could prevent her from 'being with' us in spirit if not in person.

As an Anna Chaplain much of my time is spent trying to find ways to connect with those who can't be physically with us any more and in a sense this new strange phase in our church life is bringing us face to face with a reality already faced by many of our members - perhaps we can learn from them.

And we are beginning to find new ways of 'being with' - reaching out to each other across space in prayer, in telephone conversations, through sharing in streamed worship across the ether. It won't be easy and of course there will be sadness, but perhaps there will also be a chance to realise just how deeply and richly connected we are in Christ. And if we need encouragement *The City is my Monastery* offers two wonderfully reassuring thoughts to hold onto. Firstly, Carter speaks of the extraordinary abundance of God which meets us in our scarcity and our need. But secondly, he suggests that this 'being with', this life together is with us already, it is just that we have not realised it yet or recognised the extent of the treasure that is in our midst. Perhaps these challenging times will help us to rediscover that treasure afresh. In the meantime one thing we can be sure of is that when we finally can be together in person our joy will be great and the lilies and the roses of our fellowship more beautiful and fragrant than ever.