

St John's Anglican Church in Saint Raphael has had an eventful year with the various confinements and curfews in France during the pandemic. For the first time since 1948 when the church was reconsecrated by the Bishop of Gibraltar after being used by the Nazi's during World War 2 as a store house and office for the building of the "South Atlantic Wall" in the Saint-Raphael and Fréjus we did not have a Holy Week and Easter Triduum in the Church. However, our chaplain, Rev Dr Tom Wilson and his wife, Professor Dawn Cornelio along with our Director of Music, Mrs Shirley Rowson, were able to improvise, record and post these most important Services on the church's new YouTube Channel as well as our Facebook page. This became the norm for the congregation during the two months of confinement and had the unexpected benefit of permitting our "swallows" who spend part of the year with us, and the other part in various countries across Europe and the world, to participate in our Sunday services. We have continued this videoing of our Sunday services since March of 2020 and it has helped our wider congregation stay in touch with us, as well as continuing their financial support of our ministry and mission. Our "swallows" are an active part of our worship when they are with us. They assist with greeting, reading the scriptures, and leading our prayers. One of our "swallows" co-ordinates our prayer ministry, and some of those stuck in the UK, prepare the prayers and then they are read by someone who is able to be at Church on Sundays. As a special treat for Christmas, those stuck in the UK, about 8 people, prepared the prayers with each person contributing a portion, it was a marvellous Christmas gift for those living in the south of France and missing all their friends stuck elsewhere.

For much of the rest of the year, we were able to meet in our church, while observing social distancing protocols. We have even been able to have our small choir help led our worship services, while maintaining proper distancing and other requirements. We even held our Annual Lessons and Carols service, albeit with no advertising and a very small congregation. However it was broadcast live on our Facebook Page as well as later posted on our website and YouTube channel. We were able to do the same with our Christmas Day service.

The Chaplaincy Council made the decision in January 2020 that our website needed to be redone, as it had not changed in 10 years, so we commissioned a local webpage designer to totally re-design our website. While not a cheap process, we now have a website that is easy to update and looks very modern. We are hopeful it will serve as our online welcome for the foreseeable future.

Our congregation is renowned for being incredibly welcoming and we have been missing having our after Sunday worship coffee, tea and vin d'amitié due to the pandemic not permitting this friendship ministry to take place. However, we have found a way for people to gather together, and enjoy conversation while also enjoying some exercise, with our new walking group called "the Wilderness Wanderers". In Fréjus there is a former French naval airbase including a 1.5 km runway and we gather each Friday morning for a walk and a natter. The Base Nature has a huge amount of space so people can walk beside each other while still observing social distancing requirements.

The past year has been one of great uncertainty, loneliness and even fear of the pandemic. The congregation at St John's has managed to endure this time of uncertainty, while helping to cheer and comfort all who have interacted with our members. We have even been able to maintain our level of giving to our outreach projects, the local Solidarité de Paola, an organisation that provides hot meals for those living on the streets of Saint-Raphael and Fréjus, as well as a drop-in centre where they can bathe themselves as well wash their clothes and bedding. We also have continued our contributions to the Philippine Self Help Foundation that gives people in the Philippines a hand up, rather than a handout. We have also been able to support members of our congregation who are having a difficult time due to the pandemic and not being able to work.

God be praised for continuing to shine his light through Jesus Christ on the congregation of St John's and the Anglican Chaplaincy of Saint-Raphael and the Var.

Rev Dr Tom Wilson
Anglican Chaplain of Saint-Raphael & the Var