

Things to celebrate – 2020!

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

- Isaiah 55: 8-9

These verses have spoken to us again and again over the last year. We had many things planned for 2020 – our thoughts and our ways. We hoped to mark and celebrate the 65th year of the Stewards’ Trust and build on the momentum of significant growth over the last few years.

Like so much else, those plans disappeared in March, but we were reminded to trust God. Our Covid story is one of God’s provision, of Him equipping us now and for the future, of Him using us in new ways, of Him growing our work through challenge. We praise him for it as we share some highlights with you.

Our youth work

Events:

The first lockdown couldn’t have come at a worse time for us, just days before our Easter Youth camps were due to take place. There was every excuse to give up, but that would mean giving up on the young people who love the camps and benefit so much from them in terms of their faith.

Our Youth Team responded brilliantly. Together with our amazing volunteers, they took all our Easter camps online with only a few days’ notice. Planning teams were organised, talks crafted and recorded, online games created, Bible studies written, challenges devised, online safeguarding policies written and even ‘Tic Toc’ dance routines choreographed!

The result was something very different but amazing and we saw young people growing in their faith in a way we would never have imagined.

Being among the first in the country to take residential events online, we found others wanted to learn from our experience. We were delighted to share what we had learned, and our practical resources, to enable Kingdom growth.

Further online events were organised for young people in the summer and at Christmas. In a year where youth work in the church really suffered, we were able to provide great content and maintain strong relationships with young people.

Mentoring:

From March to June and again at the end of the year, in the second lockdown, our Youth Team were in huge demand from teens craving connection with people outside their own bubbles. Demand for one-to-one mentoring and group Bible studies has never been as high, and this continues to be an area of growth.

We not only encouraged young people in their faith but there was undoubtedly a benefit in terms of their mental health. We all know how difficult 2020 was for young people. The team are not trying to be counsellors, but just having someone closer in age to talk to about how they are feeling has helped our young people enormously.

Schools and talks:

We were still able to visit schools (mostly virtually) to speak at chapel, assemblies and CUs. The team pre-recorded talks or delivered them via Zoom or MS Teams.

"We found your talk super engaging, which is a difficult thing to achieve online."

- Dean Close School

We established some exciting new relationships with schools in 2020 and this will continue to be a focus in 2021. We have an exceptional team and want to provide as many opportunities as possible for them to share their faith and support young people in theirs. If you can introduce us to any Chaplains or teachers involved in leading CUs, it would be a great help in establishing new relationships.

In the first lockdown, we reviewed our approach to certain areas. One of these was our regular youth-focused 'Bible email'. Engagement had been dropping, which shouldn't really have been a surprise as young people don't use email (apart from for school). We wanted to keep the Bible-based content, but switched to posting short 'Word of the week' films on Instagram. The results have been so encouraging:

- Since June we have posted 24 short talks
- There have been over 7,500 views
- An average of 290 views per week (equivalent to the weekly attendance of a large church!)

An additional benefit has been that the team have had many more opportunities to practice giving talks, which has many knock-on benefits.

We're now opening out the opportunity to share a 'Word of the week' beyond our team to other young people within the Stewards' Trust. In doing so, we are providing an opportunity to develop young leaders in their gifting and offer great Bible-based talks to young people and the wider Stewards' Trust 'family'.

Team structure:

Our 'Discipleship and Leadership Apprentice' (DLA) role is now a well-established one-year role on the team. We are equipping young Christian leaders through high-quality training and experiential learning on the job. The Stewards' Trust has a proven track record of helping to develop exceptional leaders (ordained and otherwise) and the DLA role is the perfect way to continue this.

Due to financial pressures caused by Coronavirus, it looks like we will need to fundraise to continue offering this role from September 2021. Please contact us if you have links to Christian Grant-Making Trusts that are focused on leadership or youth work. We believe we have a strong case to make for funding based on a proven model.

Our families and adults work

Houseparties:

Unsurprisingly, our summer family houseparties all had to be cancelled. With help from houseparty host teams, we set out to do what we've always done over the summer – to encourage people to go deeper in faith and deeper in relationship with friends and family – but in a new way.

'Houseparty@home – Pick n Mix' provided talks and teaching for all ages, youth groups on Zoom, a worship project and lots more. We could never recreate the full benefits of a houseparty and in particular the depth and intimacy of relationship with God and friends, but we found the breadth of engagement surpassed all our expectations:

- Over 9,000 downloads and views for a week of talks and teaching via Instagram and Youtube!

We are hugely grateful to the amazing speakers and other volunteers who helped make this such a success. All our speakers had been personally impacted by the work of the Stewards' Trust growing up. Hearing from them was a great reminder of the amazing leaders that the Stewards' Trust has helped to equip and nurture over the years.

Prayer:

As we entered the first lockdown, we started a weekly online prayer meeting, which was open to all the Stewards' Trust family. We prayed for a whole range of areas related to lockdown and coronavirus – key workers, business, the NHS, schools, young people, etc. Prayer in itself would have been reason enough to gather, but this group also provided an important point of regular connection to others and became a mini community.

We have kept the open prayer meeting running, but it is now on a monthly basis – from 8:30am to 9:00am on the fourth Thursday of the month. Please contact us if you would like to come along, you'd be so welcome.

Our finances

We must also give thanks to God and our donors for protecting our finances. We finished the year with a deficit, but a fraction of what it could have been.

We felt it right to offer full refunds for the cancelled youth events, but many parents and even volunteers offered to let us keep some or all of their fees to offset cancellation costs. The same was true for adult events.

As well as the cancellation costs, not running events has a big impact on our finances. Not because we make money from them – we aim to breakeven – but because they provide an opportunity to speak about our work, which often leads to donations. We face the same challenge in 2021.

Again, God has provided through the generosity of the Stewards' Trust family. Some, knowing what a challenging year it was, felt called to make one-off donations.

We are hugely grateful and humbled by the support we received. Thank you!

2021...

Many of the same challenges remain this year. We have just had to postpone our Easter Youth Camps, which is a huge disappointment. However, we can look to 2020 for proof of God's faithfulness to the Stewards' Trust and his provision.

When things start to get back to 'normal', we know the need will be greater than ever for what we do. We are still here and we're in good shape to restart fully when allowed. That is only possible because of your generosity.

Thank you and bless you.