

Review of Bath & Wells Reader returns for 2022

Each year, Readers across the diocese are required to complete an annual return – actually two returns, one being quantitative (a statistical return of what they have done in the last year), the other being qualitative (a review of ministry with their incumbent). Well, the results of the 2022 Annual Reader Returns are in - and they make spectacular reading!

Yes, the actual number of Readers in the diocese (including those with PTO) has declined very slightly (from 219 in 2021 to 207 in March this year), yet these lay ministers preached just short of 3,000 times in 2022; what makes this 10% increase over 2021 remarkable is that Readers had previously established themselves at the forefront of online worship during the pandemic, so there was already a high starting point to begin with. Those 2,952 sermons in 2022 represent some 56 sermons a week; astonishing.

If the 260% increase, yes 260% increase, in the numbers of collective worship in schools or colleges may be largely attributable to the pandemic winding down with places of learning opening up, there were also 1,947 CW or BCP Morning / Evening Prayer services led, and 334 Home Communion services. Oh, and 2,445 pastoral care visits, an area which grew less than any other at *only* 3%! If one were to regard Home Communion visits as having an important pastoral care element, as well as celebrating the Eucharist obviously, then on average, Readers undertook comfortably in excess of 1 pastoral care visit each, every month!

And let's not forget the 1,700 instances of Readers being involved in leading, or being engaged with, food banks and other community support organisations - who would have envisaged that need a couple of years ago?

While all of the statistics are exceptionally encouraging, what makes this so remarkable is that the average age for Readers in the Diocese is 72.1 years young. The very youngest of these troupers is a mere 48 years, while the most mature, who is still active, is about to celebrate their 91st birthday!

One of the Reader Reviews that crossed my desk this year was from a lady whose husband had ascended to greater glory in late 2022, and who then developed a serious illness herself. With her permission, and paraphrasing only slightly, I quote:

“She always felt that her ministry was one of encouragement, and although she hasn't preached as much as in previous years, she has tried to encourage people in other ways. Giving pastoral care via the telephone has been important throughout the year, as well as taking Home Communion to elderly members of the community. She continued to lead their homegroup which meets weekly on Zoom, and also the monthly ladies' group where Bible study and prayer have deepened their faith and friendships, especially following the Pandemic.

“Personal preparation for the homegroup studies on 2 Thessalonians, the miracles of Jesus and seven prayers of the Bible, have been particularly helpful and worthwhile in strengthening and nurturing her faith. She has also been encouraged by listening on Zoom to some excellent Bible teachers throughout the year.

“Her spiritual director has helped her through some recent challenging times, but while she continues to think of and pray for others, she regrets that she is currently unable to undertake any ministerial training or development unless it’s online on-line.

“As for her own spiritual development, looking to the future means trusting God for His will in her life. Taking one day at a time, she prays with thanksgiving for His continued peace, strength and grace.”

While it may not be evident from this quick report, the amount and variety of work that she undertakes, despite having endured such personal loss and difficulty, should be an encouragement to us all. But she acknowledges that she has only been able to continue doing all that she does, because of the comfort and courage that God has given her through the dark days of sickness and bereavement.

She is truly an inspirational lady who, I would ask, that we all pray for in all that she does, and that she may herself recover from her illness.

It is that sense of determination that pervades Reader ministry across the Diocese, that determination to serve Jesus Christ as trained and licensed theologians in the wide variety of different ways that Readers are called to do.

I was also blessed to read an incumbent’s comments about one Reader that (again, I quote with his permission) “his ministry brings life, love and Christ into our parish life wherever he goes. His care for individuals, praying, visiting, cooking, encouraging, caring (transporting!) is unsurpassed. He brings maturity and depth to our staff meetings and spiritual nurture to the parish as a whole. Age means nothing at all!”

As he approaches 74 anno domini? Pah! “Age really does mean nothing at all!”

Yes, the statistics this year are impressive but, in some respects, as 2021 was so bizarre, it is probably these anonymous stories, included with the respective Readers’ permissions, that better tell the real impact that Readers have on the churches and communities in which they minister, in which they serve.

Inevitably statistics can also bring their share of worries, particularly that Readers are no longer as young as they were; while all Readers look forward to doing whatever they can, especially as stipendiary numbers are reduced, it may be a timely reminder that they also need to be cared for, as indeed do all of God’s hard working and dedicated ministers, whether lay or ordained. We do need to be careful to ensure that neither the laity nor the clergy, in whatever guise they may minister, become overburdened and worn down.

However Readers, just like the Apostle Paul, have shrugged off the shackles of the pandemic, just as Paul shed off the chains that bound him. They are back in full swing and doing all that they can to spread God's word, serving as best as they are able in an enormous variety of ways, ministering from the very young, to those in middle age, to those of 4 score years and beyond.

Bath & Wells' Readers continue to do so much for all those who live in the Diocese, both church members and the wider community, marching forward in Christ, with God-given inspiration and determination; this article attempts a snapshot of what they do and achieve, but cannot possibly cover it all.

May God bless them as they minister.

Chris Stock

Archdeaconry Warden of Readers for Wells

Co-ordinator for the 2022 returns

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Some of the activities undertaken by Readers in the Diocese which may be considered as 'extra curricula' in 2022 include:

- Assisting with weddings
- Bell ringing
- Bereavement groups
- Catering incl for 60+ covers
- Chaplaincy incl almshouses, Anna Chaplaincy, Bath Abbey and Wells Cathedral, CMS and Pioneer students, hospitals and hospices, care homes, magistrates courts, schools, street pastors, town centres, YMCA
- Community engagement
- Deacons, eg leading the pre Eucharist
- Ecumenical
- Environmental
- Music whether singing in choirs, leading/playing music in services, starting a new ladies' choir
- PCC and similar, incl Churchwarden, Secretary, Treasurer, Administrator; Deanery, Diocesan and national Synods; as Director of Christian charities
- Schools, incl as Governors
- Supporting and hosting refugees
- Technical support for electronic service provision