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Dear friends and colleagues across the Cathedral Community,

### **GETTING BACK TO "NORMAL"?**

Looking at the last month or so, I'm trying to work out what "normal" looks like. Certainly, September at a Cathedral always feels like the beginning of a new year, and very quickly you're on a very fast train heading for Christmas. But here I want to ponder a little on these last few weeks.

The first days of September were marked by our new Bishop's pilgrimage around the different areas of the Diocese, culminating at the end of the week by a pilgrimage to Bradwell and then back from there to the Cathedral for a time of prayer and reflection. That of course all in preparation for the formal marking of the beginning of her ministry here at the Cathedral on the Saturday. Still limited numbers, but a wonderfully rich and moving welcome service, full of promise for the future.

The following week saw the launch of British Science Week with a great reception here in the Cathedral and the opening of "The Body" - the extraordinary multi-sensory installation in the Guy Harlings Garden, which many of you will have seen. It attracted thousands through the days ahead. In the same week, the students of St Mellitus College were back in the Cathedral to study, eat and pray on Thursday evenings. And the week ended with the epic seven hours of the ordinations – +Guli's first major diocesan occasion, and a wonderful day of celebration,

The days ahead looked calmer, punctuated with a special celebration with our covenant partners at Brentwood Cathedral, and then an evening baptism service here in Chelmsford Cathedral where almost the entire congregation were joining in via YouTube from the USA and the Middle East - another new experience of how technology can in some ways help bring people closer. And on the Saturday another seven hour marathon as the Cathedral welcomed lay ministers from across East London and Essex for their annual day of prayer and celebration (and even with a Cathedral Tour thrown in as part of the national Heritage Open Days!)

And the pattern continues – a great gathering in the Cathedral for the Queen's Awards for Voluntary Service and the Cathedral Friends AGM, with a remarkable personal talk by our new Bishop. And then just when things looked a little quieter, the Cathedral is transformed once more for two full weeks of graduations from Anglia Ruskin University. And as I write this we are just making the final preparations for the Archdeacon of Southend's farewell service next Saturday....

After 18 months of the pandemic, "normal" has arrived with a vengeance! And so much of that is good - the possibility of reconnecting with people we haven't seen face to face for a long time. The simple pleasure of meeting up in a cafe or sharing a meal.

But as we've reflected often in these letters and in conversation, things never actually go back to "normal". Experience changes us. And one of the challenges of the present is the range of different experiences we have all had over an extended period. How do we weave those stories together so they become a narrative we can all recognise and own? That's a challenge for families, local communities, organisations and whole cultures as we continue to evolve and adapt in response to a permanent adjustment.

Because "normal" is never "normal". Just a particular moment in time, itself always changing. A few weeks ago on BBC's Question Time, the poet and writer Benjamin Zephaniah was asked about "getting back to normal". He simply replied "but 'normal' is what got us here" - the pandemic, lockdown, and their on-going legacies today.

So the present isn't really "normal" because "normal" is always changing. That shouldn't be surprising as that's written into Christian faith - always changing, evolving, adapting in response to Jesus' invitation to turn our lives around, and to keep on turning. As the great 19th century Christian leader and teacher, John Henry Newman wrote: "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

Through this autumn, the invitation before us - beyond the busyness and the endless emails - is to find some space and time to ponder; to reflect; to say "I wonder if..." To invite God to show you what God wants you to see for the next stage of the journey.

With my best wishes.

Nicholas

