

To Work from Home

Rectors live in rectories and vicars live in vicarages and normally we work from home. It has often been thought an abuse if clergy don't live in their parishes. Home working has been forced on a lot of people by COVID and many of us are now wondering whether much more working from home will be an aspect of the new normal – and whether that would be a good thing or not.

Working from home used to be a lot more common than it has recently become. When I first arrived in the parish, the village doctor held surgeries in his own home. Not too long before that, there were two police houses in Halling. The schoolmaster used to live in the school house. The stationmaster lived at the station and some nearby cottages provided accommodation for other rail workers. Shopkeepers often literally lived over the shop. Landlords generally live in their pubs. For obvious reasons, our retained firemen were required to live close to the fire station when we had one.

There are definite advantages in having people whose job is so tied up with the community living among the people we are called to serve. We get to know people personally. We have an understanding of the challenges and opportunities they face. We have a personal stake in seeing that the community, which we live in as well as work in, prospers and flourishes. We're always available in emergency.

There are problems as well, however. There is a blurring between work and home life. If the stationmaster drops into the pub for a quiet drink after a hard day's work, he probably doesn't want to be button-holed by someone demanding to know why the 06.15 to Charing Cross was late again this morning. There is a mingling of the professional and the personal. What difference, if any, does it make if a parishioner, patient or prime suspect is a personal friend of the priest, doctor or village constable? I'm told that my great grandmother felt that she had to buy bread from a baker whose bread she didn't really like because she lived next door to his bakery. If you live in a house tied to your job, where do you live when you retire (or if you get the sack)? Some clergy used to carry on working long after they were too old to do so well because they would have had nowhere else to go if they had retired. Better arrangements have now been made to make sure that doesn't still happen.

It is also true that people who didn't work from home used to live much closer to where they lived. Within living memory, most people in Halling worked on local farms or in the cement and paper industries in the Medway Valley – within walking or cycling distance or a short ride on a bus or train. Looking back to when I had more conventional jobs and when I was at college, I've always walked or cycled to work and never had to drive or regularly to take the bus or train.

One huge advantage of working from home or near to where you live is not having to travel. It saves you time and money. It is good for the environment. It is better for those who do have to travel if the roads are less congested and public transport is less packed. Saving all that time travelling, you have more time for your family, more time for yourself and even more time for working. Having more time to prepare food and access to your own kitchen, you might even eat better.

Depending on the nature of your work, working from home instead of in an office allows you to get away with dressing casually and not shaving every day. You can mow the lawn while it's still light and finish writing that report when it's dark. If you get stuck on a task, you can take the dog for a walk (during which the solution to your problem might occur to you). Excessive stress damages your health in part because your body reacts to stress by preparing you for physical activity (fight or flight) by raising your blood pressure and heart rate and pumping sugar and fat into your bloodstream. If you're not stuck at a desk in an office when something or someone stresses you out, you can go for a run and come back healthier and ready to deal with whatever the problem was calmly and rationally. Working from home, you're indoors for the delivery guy, the plumber and the meter reader. You're on hand for any family emergencies.

So what's not to like about working from home if your work permits it? Some people like to get out of the house, especially if it's not a very nice house. You don't get to meet new people if you never go anywhere. It is debatable whether you can really work in a team with other people if you only ever meet them on the internet. You're not so likely to form friendships with them. This may be especially hard on young workers or people new to the

organisation. Working from home might turn out to be a lonely life and, in the long run, less productive than going out to work.

So there's a lot to be said on both sides (as there so often is).

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I can put you on my e mailing list for the current church magazine etc. if you ask me.