

Efforts by an innovative university chaplain has seen a prayer group grow and two upcoming baptisms from students and staff on campus amid Covid-19 lockdown.



Revd Fiona Souter of the University of Hertfordshire, in the Diocese of St Albans, has been at the forefront of supporting students and staff.

On campus to provide spiritual and social support as well as pastoral guidance, she is there for people of all faiths and none.

With Covid-19 restrictions on physical distancing, Revd Souter developed her tech-skills to rebrand as a [#virtualchaplain](#) on social media.

Now she has seen a prayer group online balloon from just one or two to double digits. While posting daily supportive messages which lasts less than a minute on Instagram, she reaches other staff and students.

["I've had two baptism candidates - one already completed - this year alone which has never happened before. I'm hoping to take both Confirmation."](#)

It's not just traditional messages of support though. A daily puzzle is the most commented on feature of her digital ministry and although Revd Souter said: ["It's really not what I expected to be doing in a crisis"](#) but her efforts have kept students and staff positive and cheerful.



With 1 in five students being international, the University of Hertfordshire is one of the nation's most diverse universities. That means self-isolation is a common feature on campus, with many students having to live alone for 14 days.

Now, Revd Souter, along with other colleagues at the university, are offering distraction and support for those in quarantine and those trying to enjoy university life within the Covid-19 rules.

An online cafe, a quiz session, and prayer session, are all offered virtually - while a Walk and Talk day sees students booking a slot to walk outside with Revd Souter for company.

Her offerings also see her listening to alumni missing the support offered by university chaplains - something predicted by a group of Higher Education Chaplains earlier this year.

Revd Souter explained: "Those who have graduated in the last year have had all their expectations taken away. The examination of their subjects had to alter, no big graduation ceremony as a rite of passage, a job market in crisis, perhaps living at home again when their expectation would be to get work and find their own flat.

"It's all changed for them."

More information:

- University chaplains have long been understood to have a significant impact on students and staff wellbeing, as **revealed in this 2019 report**.
 - This year, the Church of England **provided resources and prayers** for freshers students ahead of the return to university in autumn 2020.
 - Churches in the Diocese of Exeter launched a **dedicated StudentHelp service** this year to support university campuses under local lockdown restrictions.
 - The Church of England has seen an increasing focus on mental health. Churches have supported **children of all age groups** in receiving mental health support, the Diocese of Manchester has continued with **a large-scale mental health support** programme, and a church in **the Diocese of Liverpool have launched mental health** support for people of all faiths and none.
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