

Our Ref: +PBW--+RT/ajh

11 May 2020

Dear Colleagues

We want to start our letter by repeating our thanks for the incredible way in which you continue to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are increasingly aware of the impact this is having on our own friends and families; on our local communities and businesses; those who need to self-isolate; those who have lost work and livelihoods; and those for whom the current situation is a serious challenge to their mental wellbeing or sense of safety. We are also very conscious of those who have suffered bereavement and loss at this time. This reminds us all that we need to continue to be faithful in praying for friends and neighbours; for those who lead and guide us in government; for the NHS and care workers; and for all in our schools, local councils and emergency services. It is humbling to realise that we are being kept safe and provided for by the dedication and courage of so many people.

We are writing to you now to update you on recent developments regarding our church buildings. Last week the House of Bishops affirmed that diocesan bishops can issue guidance about the first stage of a gradual easing of restrictions on our buildings and activities whilst **continuing to keep our church buildings closed**. A **phased approach** to lifting restrictions was approved, with three broad stages as infection levels improve:

**Phase 1** An initial immediate phase allowing very limited access to church buildings for activities such as recording or streaming of services or private prayer by an Incumbent or an appointed person in their own parish, so long as the necessary hygiene and physical distancing precautions are taken.

**Phase 2** Subsequently access for some rites and ceremonies when allowed by law, observing appropriate physical distancing and hygiene precautions.

**Phase 3** Worship services with limited congregations meeting, when Government restrictions are eased to allow this.

Cont'd ...

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We are therefore able to issue some new permissive guidance (see the second attachment to this email). This guidance and that from the National Church are also available on the diocesan website: <https://www.bathandwells.org.uk/coronavirus>.

We hope that this will enable you in your own Benefice to think together about whether you may wish to appoint and authorise one person to enter a church building for the purpose of private or personal prayer, recording worship, or the live-streaming of worship. We need to stress, the importance of consultation and preparation before taking any steps in this regard. You will also want to pay attention to other elements of the guidance about safety, cleaning, and social distancing. Those who are vulnerable because of health issues or age may understandably decide to continue to stay at home. Details of what is involved are set out in our accompanying guidance and it is important that before any decisions are made that careful attention is given to the **full guidance**. This is a very limited provision and in essence it sets out the following criteria:

- An Incumbent or one appointed and authorised person (clergy or lay) may enter a church building for the purpose of engaging in private or personal prayer, praying the Daily Office and/or celebrating the Eucharist (if clergy) on behalf of the community they serve, and to live stream or pre-record worship.
- The Incumbent or the one appointed and authorised person may enter the church building only with members of their household with whom they are in lockdown and the door should be locked.
- Consideration should be made of the proximity of the church and a visit should generally be part of their daily exercise.
- Clergy and lay leaders, especially those with underlying health problems, or who are shielding people in their household with such problems, should **not** feel under any obligation to do this themselves, nor should anyone be asked who is in one of the government's risk categories.
- Consideration should be given to what cleaning will be needed to make our churches safe (e.g. bat, mice and rat faeces, mould spores, dust, legionella disease in water systems, as well as disinfecting gates and door handles etc).

In offering this guidance we trust Incumbents and Churchwardens, and all appointed people, to follow the spirit of it. Our priority must be to act responsibly to safeguard ourselves and other people from infection. If you have any questions then please address them to your archdeacon, who will be pleased to give you any further guidance or support that you need.

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In sending out this advice we would like to assure you that if you are content with leading worship from home for the time being, having set everything up to that end, you should feel under no obligation to switch back into the church building. Likewise, it is perfectly fine to continue sharing services which are recorded or streamed by colleagues, or to use the resources which are available on the website.

We hope in the coming weeks, if new COVID-19 cases and deaths continue to decline, to offer new guidance about funerals in church and, subject to a change in government restrictions, about opening our churches for parishioners and visitors to enter for private prayer. However, we need to stress that this a phased approach to opening our church buildings and we will continue to consult and listen to National Church Guidance before issuing any further guidance. Coming out of 'lockdown' is a more complex process than going into it.

These are challenging times and we continue to learn what it means to be called upon to proclaim afresh the Gospel in each generation. Whilst the Gospel message is unchanging, how we proclaim God's love in Jesus in this generation requires us to reimagine our future as well as respond to the immediate crisis. Many of us have discovered the potential of reaching a wider community through the restrictions of lockdown and so we invite you to reflect on what we can learn from that as we move into a new future. How can we continue to be missional, pastoral and grow as disciples in lockdown not merely wait for a return to the patterns of the past?

Many of us are no doubt finding the Scriptures to be a source of inspiration and encouragement at this time. We end therefore with this verse from Psalm 28.7: 'The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart is uplifted, with my song I give thanks to him.'

Thank you again for all that you are doing and this comes with our continued prayers.

With every blessing.

+ Peter

+ Ruth

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