

Dear Friends,

Events are moving with enormous speed and you will still be absorbing the news of the third national lockdown announced yesterday by the Prime Minister following a rapid increase in cases of the virus not just in the South East but also here in Lancashire. There will be two briefings this week, today and Friday, and in this one we will focus on the issue of public worship.

The guidance issued by government makes it clear that people are allowed to leave their homes to attend public worship. We have also been made aware that Government has made the decision because it considers worship to be a low-risk activity. This is a tremendous testament to the work that so many of you have done in adjusting worship to ensure it is safe. There are only a tiny number of instances where the virus has been transmitted in a church setting.

That having been said, there is clearly a great deal of anxiety amongst church leaders about how best to act. The fact that worship in church buildings can continue to be offered does not mean that it must, and indeed there will be places where the wisest course of action is to suspend worship in this way for a period of time. Our advice is as follows:

Continue to offer public worship in church buildings if you are confident you can do it safely. If you are to do so, then please:

Ensure you continue to adhere rigidly to the procedures around social distancing, face masks, hand hygiene etc and don't become lax or complacent about these.

Revisit your risk assessment and update as possible or necessary.

Keep worship short and simple.

There should be no choirs, choir practices or music groups. An organist or a keyboard player to offer some accompaniment is perfectly safe, but we would recommend against having a cantor or soloist during this lockdown.

Be really strict in ensuring that people disperse afterwards and do not stay in the building or gather outside to chat in groups afterwards.

There should be no Sunday Schools or children's/youth activities. Children need to stay in their household bubbles.

Don't pressure people to come to church if they are in any way anxious; remembering particularly churchwardens and sides people.

Keep your decision under review.

At the same time there are other ways to worship God and pray for our nation.

So if you don't feel that you can offer public worship in churches safely, then suspend for a limited time. If you are to do this then:

Bishop Julian will give permission to suspend worship under Canon B14A for the duration of the current lockdown restrictions, but please write to him to inform him that worship has been suspended following consultation with wardens/PCC.

Our worship and church buildings are public, so place a notice in the porch and update your a Church Near You (ACNY) page to advertise your decision

Ensure that your people have access to alternative provisions - online worship or a worship at home resource. If you cannot do this within the Parish, the Diocese is continuing to offer both. Worship at Home resources can be found each Sunday here and news of this week's online worship (on the Diocesan YouTube Channel) will be in Friday's briefing.

Maintain good pastoral contact with people, keeping in mind the most appropriate means of doing so for different members of your congregation.

Continue to operate community support initiatives such as food banks as safely as possible.

Set regular review dates. Physical worship is not something people can do without for long.

Please do what is right locally. You will want to bear in mind circumstances such as:

Your access to volunteers

The size of your building and ability to ventilate the space

The make-up of your congregation

The mood locally

The number of buildings for which you have responsibility (some benefices are offering worship in one building)

Don't be swayed by what the next door Parish is doing or by what you read on the internet. And please remember to show grace to those parishes who have come to a different view from your own.

We realise that the impact of the Government directive is that a difficult decision has to be made in the local church and that this will be a cause of stress for some of you, especially where congregations are unable to agree. If you are in a quandary or finding this difficult, please email the Coronavirus email address or speak to a Bishop or Archdeacon. We will talk it through with you and help you to come to a mind.

Livestreaming

The guidance for this remains unchanged and, where there is not a congregation present whilst you stream or record, it is possible to have singers and a small music group.

Grants are available from the Financial Assistance Group to help with equipment for livestreaming. Just follow this link.

Private Prayer in Church Buildings

Churches CAN remain open for private prayer outside of advertised service times as long as the appropriate guidance is followed.

Meetings and Groups

Face to face meetings of PCCs and standing committees must cease and should take place online. Likewise House Groups, Bible Study Groups and Prayer Groups should not meet in person until regulations change.

It is an enormous privilege that, during this time of crisis, the nation has called upon its church to keep praying and we must answer that call. Our corporate worship will look different for the next few months but keeping our eyes fixed on Him, who is the author and perfecter of our faith continues to be the church's duty and its joy.

Coronavirus Email Address

If you have questions or problems, please email: coronavirus@blackburn.anglican.org. It is important that clergy who are self-isolating send us a note to this address.

We are not people of fear:

we are people of courage.

We are not people who protect our own safety:

we are people who protect our neighbours' safety.

We are not people of greed:

we are people of generosity.

We are your people God,

giving and loving,

wherever we are,

whatever it costs

For as long as it takes

wherever you call us.

Amen.