



AD CLERUM Update 13

3rd June 2020

Dear Colleagues,

You will be aware following the Prime Minister's statement last week that, contrary to the hopes and expectations expressed in my Ascension Day *Ad clerum*, the Government decided not to include places of worship in the current phase of reopening public places after lockdown. This means that for the time being, it will continue to be unlawful for members of the public to enter our church buildings either for private prayer or for public worship. It goes without saying that this has come as a tremendous disappointment and frustration for many, including me.

To be fair, the Government is faced with an impossible balancing act, weighing up the very real danger of a resurgence in Covid-19 infections over against the growing economic and social damage caused by the lockdown. It is evident that the Government is prioritising the relaxation of the restrictions which are seen as causing most harm to the economy and to the social fabric. For better or worse, access to places of worship (spanning the spectrum of religious traditions in this country, not just church buildings) is not at the top of the priority list from the perspective of the Government and its scientific advisers. We may agree or disagree with their assessment; but whatever our views, we are bound to obey the law of the land and as Christians, to support and pray for those who in the final event have to shoulder the responsibility for these difficult decisions.

So for the avoidance of doubt, there is no change to the current position and church buildings must remain closed (except for the limited access already allowed to clergy and lay ministers) until further notice. I hope that the next stage may come sooner rather than later, and I know that the Archbishop of Canterbury in partnership with the Cardinal is pressing the Government hard to produce an indicative timetable so that we know where we stand and can prepare accordingly.

Until a date is announced – and there is much press speculation – please continue to use the Diocesan Guide, *Preparing to re-open our church buildings*, I circulated in my last *Ad clerum* and which is available on the diocesan website:

<https://exeter.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Preparing-to-Re-open-our-Church-Buildings-FINAL-v4.pdf>

The Guide is there to help you think through the decisions and actions that need to take place before re-opening a building. When it is finally legally possible for church buildings to re-open, this does *not* mean that all our buildings have to re-open

immediately, let alone on day one! Can I urge you, therefore, to use this time to think through your options and to develop your own local strategy, particularly in multi-parish rural benefices? Work together across your Mission Community to coordinate when and whether to open each church or not. What is the future of your church buildings in this new landscape? Can I also commend to you the various CMD courses on Zoom that Philip Sourbut and the team have arranged for clergy and readers? Let's not miss the opportunity that this space affords to renew our theological learning.

New ways of being Church

We have established a diocesan working group *Re-imagining Church* to look at the opportunities and unexpected gifts this crisis is generating. The truth is that we all find ourselves stumbling into an unknown future with our arms outstretched, feeling our way forward very slowly. Adapting the Emmaus Road analogy, we find ourselves walking along the road listening to a stranger explaining things that we know, but somehow in a different way that is opening our eyes. I look forward to sharing with you their ideas in due course.

Marking our Communities: Liturgical Resources

As I write this letter, our television screens are full of pictures of the civil unrest in the United States following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis at the hands of a police officer. Racism, and the injustice it breeds, is an affront to human dignity and ultimately to God. But the wave of unrest also shows how fragile communities can be. Which is why, as we emerge from lockdown, shaping worship that will articulate the cries of people's hearts and bear them into the presence of God will be so important. Please find three attachments of liturgical resources to help you in this task as you travel the road of recovery with the communities you serve.

The first document, *Opening the doors: re-entering our church buildings*, has suggestions for when our church buildings can open for individual private prayer and, later on, when gatherings for public worship are once again permitted. In parallel with this, the Diocesan Communications Team is designing posters that can be downloaded to advertise the re-opening and are assembling ideas for prayer stations that can safely be used to aid reflection. Opening the doors of our church buildings will be a golden opportunity to invite local people to pause and reflect, and to rediscover their parish church as their prayer space.

The second document contains *Prayers of Lament, Thanksgiving and Restoration*. During the weeks and months ahead, many will be renewed by a welcome return to familiar patterns of worship, but others with underlying health issues will still be self-isolating. Wherever people find themselves, we need to find ways of helping them explore their experiences of this pandemic in the light of the risen Christ. Helping our communities grieve and recover their self-confidence is all part of our calling to 'serve the people of Devon with joy'.

The third document, *When we meet again: remembering and memorials*, focuses on bereavement. In many parts of the country, people have been unable to plan or

attend funerals, as they would have wanted to. Although each death will have been marked with care and compassion, with thanksgiving and hope, many will feel that the story of a person's life has not been adequately told. When the Government eases restrictions and we are able to meet again, there will be a need to create opportunities for thanksgiving and remembering in differing ways and different contexts.

All these resources will be posted on the Church of England website shortly. Sadly, as and when public worship is permitted, it may not be possible for it to include congregational singing for some months. National guidance about music in worship is in the process of being drafted.

'For such a time as this...'

It has been very moving to discover the range of the experiences and challenges clergy are continuing to face, sometimes on a daily basis, as a result of this pandemic. We are in the process of collating the findings of 'Listening in Deaneries' in order to be able to share with you a fuller picture of life across the county and wondering if and how we could orchestrate a similar listening exercise for lay people in the Diocese.

'All occasions invite God's mercies, and all times are his seasons,' wrote the poet John Donne. In the mercy of God, there are indeed lessons to be learned, opportunities to be grasped and wisdom to be distilled. We ask that God will continue to guard and guide us in the words of this Methodist prayer:

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.

With the assurance of my prayers for you and my thanks for our partnership in the Gospel,

+ Robert Exon