

5TH May 2020

Dear Friends,

First, I hope that this letter finds you well and safe, but also know that a number of you have been affected in various ways by the current situation due to Covid-19, and some have been bereaved of faced personal illness, as such we cannot make light of the position we find ourselves in, and need to hold one another gently, graciously and in prayer. Please be assured of my prayers for you.

Second, for clarity, this letter will be received by all Ministers, Circuit Lay Workers, Local Preachers and Church Steward contacts.

I am writing to you to inform you of a decision taken by the Circuit Leadership Team on the 27th April, this has also been discussed by the Co-Superintendents and the Circuit Staff Team. That decision is that we will not be opening our buildings for Public Worship until at least September, and will therefore not be making the June- August Plan. We will however be looking to make some form of Plan for the September to November Quarter, and be keeping an eye on all of the current protocols and guidelines. In addition to this we are aware that for some of our churches, particularly the LEP's, that eccumenical relationships will come into play and that we will need to be mindful of what other denominations are doing and thinking. This has not been a decision taken easily or lightly, but has, been undertaken through consultation and prayer.

The reason for our decision is the desire to keep people safe, and our reflections on how best to do this led us to the conclusion that we must make this decision. Even our larger buildings would only be able to hold 20-30 people if proper social distancing were to be observed, we would be unable to use worship books or hymn books, and even if we could have hymn books there would be no singing because of the danger it poses. The need to guard entrances and clean down the building after a service simply make the practicalities of meeting far too difficult to conetemplate.

I am aware that for some this news will not be a shock, and may come as a relief, while for others this news may be very difficult to hear. I know that our ministers have and will continue to be in touch with their congregations and that a variety of online, television and radio services are currently being accessed by people in many different ways, some are writing letters, some offering reflections and written prayers, we are all doing the best we can with our various skill sets. That will continue, and if Local Preachers would like to offer a reflection, a thought, to write a letter, or share some inspiration that would be most welcome. Please email them to me, or send them to me by post, or simply give me a call, and we will make sure what you might offer can be made available.

I was asked today where I felt God was in all of this, my response was probably wholly inadequate, but I will share it with you anyway. I see God in the healing of creation, the lack of pollution due to our changed circumstances has brought dolphins back into Venice, and a much higher air quality, apparetnly there was a deer photographed wandering around Sheffield, and a badger seen wandering along the station platform (I wonder where he was going). I also see God in the coming together of communities for mutual support,

and in the support offered to others. I see God in the God who weeps and groans with us in our prayers as the Spirit takes our wordless sighs as we encounter pain and grief and transforms them into deep prayers. I also see God in the suffering servant Christ who gave his all for us and asks us to walk and work with him in these days so that all might be well. Finally I reflect on some of the words of our Covenant Prayer, where we pray “let me be laid aside for you”. We have been laid aside as a church, our usual activities have ceased, but the Spirit is still at work among us, and calling us to find signs of the kingdom. I suspect there are many, and invite you to reflect upon that. When you ask the question where is God on all of this, how do you answer it? I would be grateful for your answers, for together we need to think about how to be church in this day and age.

I leave you with the words of Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² *a time to be born, and a time to die;*

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ *a time to kill, and a time to heal;*

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ *a time to weep, and a time to laugh;*

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ *a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;*

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ *a time to seek, and a time to lose;*

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ *a time to tear, and a time to sew;*

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ *a time to love, and a time to hate;*

a time for war, and a time for peace.

There will be a time to meet again, to embrace again, to eat together again, to rejoice in gathering, to share bread and wine and the right hand of fellowship, but that time is not now. For now, we refrain from all of those things and more, but we are not alone, for the promise of God still stands and we are held in love.

Lastly I will say we are keeping in touch with the latest news and guidance from the Government, the City Authorities and the Connexion, and are prepared to be flexible as necessary, the priority remains, to keep one another safe as much as we are able.

Peace and blessings



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