18 March 2020

**To all Clergy in the Diocese of Leeds**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In a rapidly changing environment, advice regarding the coronavirus pandemic has been updated regularly on our website in line with national government and Church of England guidance. Although we remain unclear about how this might develop in the weeks and months to come, we now have longer-term rulings from the government and guidance from the Church of England that allow us to consider a number of different elements of advice for you.

In the midst of this crisis, and before going further, let me assure you and those whom you serve of our prayers. The Church of England is well set up for offering pastoral care in all our communities, however small or great that offer might be. Thank you for what you are doing already and for how you will lead your parishes in the weeks and months to come.

Christians need no reminder of our common human mortality, nor of the fragility of life in a contingent material world. We preach this stuff in the good times; now we are given an opportunity to live it out when the pressure is upon us all. We are drawn by hope, not driven by fear. Our trust is in the God who raised Jesus, and we walk with grace-filled and hope-fuelled hearts, following this same Jesus who gave his life for us. Our scriptures also call us to keep joy alive when the desert threatens to dry us out – looking for the songs of hope and singing them for all to hear.

It is natural for us to be worried about our own well-being and that of those whom we love. The threat to public health and the economy appears to grow by the day. We will also be conscious of those who are elderly, live alone, have underlying health problems or are isolated. We need to consider how to offer practical care and love to them during these uncertain times. This includes prayer, care and attention.

We now face both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge has to do with how we worship, where we pray, how we share together, and how we care for those around us to whom we are committed. The opportunity is, strangely, the invitation, when everything is stripped back to essentials, to rediscover what it is to be the *church dispersed* when we are unable to be the *church gathered*. We can also get back to the simplicity of praying without the hectic activity that often shapes our lives. We also have the opportunity to step up to leadership in our communities in fresh ways.

The Diocese of Leeds covers a very large geographical area, and the particular contexts in which our parishes lie are extremely diverse. This means that, united in Christ and bound together as his Body, our service of those in our particular parishes will vary according to nature and size. Therefore, what follows is not intended to be prescriptive in every detail, but to provide clear lines that should be followed while attention is paid to the particularity of the local. In other words, please use your discretion and offer leadership locally, working within the hygiene and distancing guidelines.

Finally, words matter in all this. We must not use the language of ‘social distancing’, but, rather, ‘physical distancing’. Social interaction is now more important than ever; we just have to be more creative about how we enable people to interact without touch, contact or, sometimes, presence. We are called to be good shepherds – feeding the sheep whatever the weather. Let’s not waste a crisis, but dig deep into the resources God has already given us.

**NATIONAL AND DIOCESAN ADVICE**

We must check the national advice daily and flex our response accordingly. This means being cautious and not causing panic or undue alarm … at the same time as being firm in doing what is necessary to protect (especially) the most vulnerable people. Life must carry on, but we need to be sensible and sacrificial in how we proceed.

If we are instructed nationally to ***lock down*** completely – as is the case already in other countries – we will update all that follows here.

If you need care or contact or general advice, please be in touch with your area bishop or archdeacon. Church House will respond to enquiries, too, but we advise that email is better than phone where possible as most people are now working remotely. Phones will be routed through, so business can continue; but, please be aware of the limitations we might experience in working in this way.

This has been a terrible way for Debbie Child to end her role and for Jonathan Wood to begin his as Diocesan Secretary. Jonathan is taking charge from now, advised by Debbie where appropriate. So, please see him as the primary lead in relation to diocesan matters via Church House in Leeds.

**WORSHIP**

The Church of England’s advice on services of worship and other church gatherings can be found at http://www.churchofengland.org/coronavirus or directly via the front page of our diocesan website at www.leeds.anglican.org. This advice may change as things develop. However, we can now advise the following:

***Public services of worship*** should now cease. But, prayer and worship must not. Some churches are already live-streaming services so that people can join in via their own computer wherever they are. If you plan to stream services, please ensure that our Director of Communications, Chris Tate, has details in order that this can be advertised on our website and people can access it. If you wish to learn how to stream, the Church of England’s Digital Communications team have offered advice here.

Our church ***buildings*** can remain open, but attention must be paid to the serious advice of public health specialists on how they might be used in ways that do not endanger those who enter. Some churches have already decided to open twice each day in order that the priest or a lay minister can do Morning and Evening Prayer. If the odd person comes in, they can sit at a requisite distance and listen or join in. Our churches can remain open for people to sit and pray or enjoy the silence of the sacred. Where available, recorded music might be played. In churches that can be attended for longer, prayers could be said at regular intervals whether or not anyone is there to join in. Our buildings offer sanctuary.

Should your building be suspected of contamination by a symptomatic person at any point, we advise you to follow the PHE cleaning guidance which can be found here. At the time of writing this means keeping the premises closed and isolated for at least 72 hours – the length of time the virus can survive on hard surfaces – before routine cleaning.

***Baptisms and confirmations*** must now be postponed (not cancelled). The Maundy Thursday ***Chrism Eucharist*** is cancelled, but I will be in Wakefield Cathedral for prayer and the re-affirmation of ordination vows, and this will be streamed in order that all clergy can join in a simple act of worship remotely-but-together. Details will follow.

Our ***three cathedrals*** are to continue worship as they have done for centuries, praying two or three times each day and keeping the building open for limited periods. This, along with clergy doing similarly in our parish churches, will take us back to a model of church in which we (as it were) pray *for* the parish, diocese and nation even if not *with* the parish, diocese and nation. We can pray on behalf of those who cannot pray for themselves or with others.

In his book ‘An Experiment in Providence’ Tim Jenkins reminds us of the obvious: each parish has a building and each building has a ‘person’. So, why doesn’t the person go into the building and pray for the parish? Local social media groups (or a notice in shop windows?) can be used to let people know that they are being prayed for at these times and in this way.

If you find yourself with a small group of people in church, please observe all advice on hygiene and distancing.

No decision has been made regarding the Petertide ***ordinations***. There are several options for how we might handle these – including taking on stipendiaries as lay workers until Michaelmas when they will be ordained along with self-supporting ordinands. More information will follow in due course, but, if you are involved with ordinands or their prospective parishes, be confident and don’t worry unduly.

We are still awaiting national advice regarding the conduct of and legalities around weddings and funerals. However, the current advice is that ***weddings*** can take place, but with only the officiant, the couple and two witnesses in attendance. Postponement might be the option couples go for otherwise. ***Banns*** should now be avoided as they require the presence of a public congregation; instead, a common licence should be applied for from the Registry – more expensive, but much more flexible. ***Funerals*** may be conducted with a limited number of attendees – in all cases observing hygiene and distancing advice. You might wish to encourage burial or cremation privately with a memorial service to follow once ‘normality’ has been restored. This is a good time proactively to contact funeral directors in order that, as advice updates and changes, we are already in conversation with them. Further advice will follow in due course if we face the challenge of a high volume of deaths.

Please keep looking at the website ***FAQs*** for updates in the days and weeks ahead.

The ***Eucharist*** can and should be celebrated in church by the priest, but, in keeping with Catholic tradition, Communion can be taken by the celebrant and received ‘spiritually’ by anybody else. This can be streamed or videoed, too. Any opportunity to pray for the people is good.

I am planning a schedule of videos, blogs and streamed events, including an address and prayers for each day in ***Holy Week and through Easter***. These will be streamed and accessible on the diocesan website and you might wish to encourage parishioners to access them, if they wish.

**PASTORAL CARE**

Clergy commit themselves to a model of servant leadership that seeks to demonstrate the self-giving love of God in Jesus Christ. We need now to be looking at creating or renewing mechanisms for pastoral care in our parishes that start with (but go beyond) those who belong to the church community itself. This is particularly important as we seek to ensure the safety and care of those most elderly, isolated, lonely or marginalised. We encourage you to audit your parish resources and establish a plan for communication and care - especially when inter-personal contact is being discouraged. Many of you are already doing this, and we thank you for your leadership in this way.

Please be careful about your own health and well-being during this unprecedented time. If you are over 70, have an underlying health challenge, begin to suffer any symptoms of ill-health or just get worried, please take good care to self-isolate whilst informing your parochial colleagues, area dean, archdeacon and/or bishop. If you need help, please speak up quickly. If you live alone, please establish now a line of communication in order to be confident that you will not be left alone.

Many local initiatives are springing up – from Facebook groups to ‘good neighbour’ postcard systems. We don’t need to reinvent the wheel, but do use whatever resources there are locally to communicate well and ensure that each road or area has people who will watch out for the lonely, the sick or those who can too easily fall off everybody’s radar.

Food banks are suffering from a massive lack of donations. Many people are going to suffer as jobs end, people get laid off and the supply chains run dry. Please encourage all to give sacrificially and provide food and goods where possible in order to support those who will otherwise despair in hunger and loneliness – including families. Please encourage local businesses and shops where the future looks very uncertain and mood might be very low.

Two very practical matters: (a) we are trying to keep our small business contractors in work and propose that repairs and works to clergy houses continue where sanitary and only with the consent of the householders – so, please continue to contact the Property Team as usual; (b) please try to continue your Parish Share payments as these pay for clergy stipends. We will be in touch in due course regarding potential financial support for parishes in emergency need.

**GOVERNANCE**

Obviously, PCC meetings, Annual Parochial Church Meetings, Deanery Synods, etc are also necessarily suspended. The legalities of these are being looked into and more will follow. However, in order to be clear at this point, the Diocesan Bishop can exercise powers (under section 10 of the Churchwardens Measure 2001 and rule 78 of the CRR) to extend or alter the time for the holding of meetings and elections. The Churchwardens Measure 2001 and the Church Representation Rules stipulate that annual meetings must take place by 31 May each year.

I intend to use my powers under those conditions by extending the period of office of current churchwardens or PCC members until at least 31 October 2020 whilst we await legislation that will regularise synodical elections and the election of a new General Synod. I will inform you specifically of the provisions once they have been agreed (after receiving more definitive advice from London).

**SUMMARY**Every day, please check the national advice at www.churchofengland.org/coronavirus or on the front page of the diocesan website: www.leeds.anglican.org, and respond according to your particular circumstances.

At the time of writing, the advice is:

Public services of worship should cease
But some services could be live-streamed. (Let Chris Tate know if you intend to do this).
Please make this coming Sunday a Day of Prayer and Action, lighting a candle & putting it in a window at 7pm.

Church buildings can remain open

If Morning and Evening Prayer takes place, ensure any parishioners sit at a requisite distance.
Recorded music might be played & prayers said at regular intervals.

The Eucharist may be celebrated in church by the priest
Communion can be taken by the celebrant & received ‘spiritually’ by anybody else. Can be streamed/videoed.

Pastoral care

Please audit your parish resources & establish a plan for communication & care.
Use local initiatives (from FaceBook groups to ‘good neighbour’ postcard systems) to ensure that each road/area has people who will watch out for the lonely & the sick.
Encourage donations to food banks, & please support (financially & emotionally) local businesses & shops where possible.

Personal care
Be sure to take care of your own physical and mental health. Don’t hesitate to self-isolate if necessary (please inform parochial colleagues, area dean, archdeacon and/or bishop).
If you live alone, establish now a line of communication in order to be confident that you will not be left alone.

The Maundy Thursday Chrism Eucharist is cancelled
Details will follow of a service to be streamed from Wakefield Cathedral.

Petertide ordinations
More information to follow.

Governance

PCC meetings, Annual Parochial Church Meetings, Deanery Synods, etc are suspended. More information on the legalities of these to follow.

Bishop Nick intends to extend the period of office of current churchwardens or PCC members until at least 31 October 2020. More information on this and the elections to Deanery Synods, to follow.

Bishop Nick commends the letter written by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on Tuesday.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This will prove to be an unprecedentedly stressful time for all of us who are called to care for others. It can also be a time for us to live out the Christian vocation of unconditional love. Let us look for the opportunities to love and care for one another, too. When stress is high we can become shortsighted and critical; let us be careful to be generous in word and action in the name of Christ.

I commend the letter written by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on Tuesday. Please make this coming Sunday a Day of Prayer and Action, lighting a candle and putting it in a window at 7pm. The bishops will, where appropriate, pray in parish churches; the cathedral deans will pray in churches where they hold the patronage.

We are called to be a hopeful people, joyful in adversity. This crisis has come upon the world as we walk the path to Jerusalem with Jesus and his friends. Easter awaits. And this Holy Week and Easter might prove to be like no other we have experienced. I pray that Christ will accompany us along this path as, recognising how thin is the ice upon which we normally skate through life, we also know how deep is the love of God who gave himself for us.

***Keep us, good Lord,***

***Under the shadow of your mercy***

***In this time of uncertainty and distress.***

***Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,***

***And lift up all who are brought low;***

***That we may rejoice in your comfort,***

***Knowing that nothing can separate us from your love***

***In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

***(from the Diocese of Exeter)***

+Nicholas Leeds on behalf of

+Paul Kirkstall

+Tony Wakefield

+Toby Bradford

+Helen-Ann Ripon

+Jonathan Huddersfield