

Letter to the Church – 6th September 2020

Dear church family member,

It has been such a long time since we met together in church. Whilst we have been able to keep the services going online, it has not been the same as meeting together. As it says in the Bible, **“Do not give up the habit of meeting together”** (Hebrews 10:15) and there is something that happens when we come together as the family of God to worship the Lord together.

Churches were given the option to open from early July, but we felt that it was probably best to wait and see how things developed. With the decision being made that schools would return in September it seemed like this would be a good goal for us to work towards as a church.

The Corona virus has affected us all in different ways. Some people are tired of it and just want to get back to some kind of “normal” life. For others, it is still a very unsettling time. For some of you, you have been shielding either for yourself or a loved one and the thought of returning to church is still an area of great concern. We really do understand, and we don’t want anyone to feel obligated to attend. If you are concerned for whatever reason, please feel free to stay at home and watch the service online if you are able. For those who are not online we will try to continue recording the service to DVD.

The Centre Management Committee have been meeting over the summer to look into the latest government and Church of England guidelines for places of worship, and we believe we have come up with a really good solution that will enable us to meet - having said this we cannot guarantee 100% protection, but as we know life itself is full of risks and we believe the steps taken will keep the risks to an absolute minimum.

The services will be different to anything we have experienced before, and it is important that we understand this. Throughout our time in church we will have to maintain social distancing, and everyone will have to wear a face mask.

Rather than a 9:00am Book of Common Prayer service, or our usual 10:30am Morning Prayer/Holy Communion, we are going to be holding just one service, the 9:30am Principal service. This service will be predominantly a Holy Communion service. At this moment in time we will not be able to sing, but this will probably change at some point in the future. In this service we will have music played by either the piano or the band and we will use this as a time to reflect, pray, and draw closer to the Lord Jesus. We will have people reading and leading the prayers and there will be a focus on the preaching of the word.

Regarding the 11:00am service, Rachel and Adrian were concerned that over the last five months we have not been able to give significant age-related Christian input and teaching for children, youth and families in our online services. Given that our Mission Statement is that “We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord”, it seems that it is only right to dedicate one of the two service slots to children, youth and families. At this time, we are unable to hold a creche or run children or youth groups, but if we don’t do something, we may well end up losing many of our children and families. We believe this must be a priority for us as a church. The change in time is simply to help recognise that this is something new and stop anyone attending and being disappointed if it is not the service they were expecting.

People can attend whichever service they want, and over the next few weeks I am sure that confidence will begin to grow as we meet. We currently have about 90 chairs in church whilst being able to observe 2m social distancing. Obviously, our typical congregation is usually more than this and should we need to add more chairs in the future, this can be done if the 2m guideline is relaxed.

For the past 5 months the online services have been for everyone worshipping in their homes. However, when we start the services the focus will be upon the worship in church, and those worshipping at home will be able to watch the service live. We will not be able at this stage to offer the post-service Zoom coffee or Zoom prayer because the facilitators will probably be in the church service.

I believe that in this new phase, what we need to do as a church is to refocus upon Jesus through the working of the Holy Spirit. I believe that the word we need to have in our minds is “encounter”. Whilst watching on our TVs and computers at home it is all too easy to simply watch rather than engage. As we move into this new phase of ministry, we need to consider the importance of **“dwelling in the house of the LORD...to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple”** (Psalm 27:4).

For the next few weeks, I am proposing we focus upon the cross of Christ, the empty tomb, the ascension of Jesus and coming of the Holy Spirit, and upon his promised return at the end of time. We need to remind ourselves again why we are Christians and refocus upon the fundamentals of our faith.

To help the services run smoothly we will need a team of welcomers (sides people) at both services, and we have asked John Lodemore to oversee this. The welcomers will guide you as to what to do when you arrive. To avoid chaos or confusion, can I ask those attending not to move chairs but to ask one of the welcomers for assistance. If you are willing to volunteer as a welcomer, we would really appreciate it. Please speak to John.

As a church we are going to try and maintain a 2m distance between groups of people. If you are in a “bubble” please feel free to sit together. I know that one or two of you have joined household bubbles so it will be fine to sit together if this is the case. If 2m cannot be maintained the guidelines states that further precautions are required. However, as we will be wearing face masks those precautions will already be in place should we go slightly under the 2m ideal.

For Holy Communion, the words will be on the screens, and we will use wafers instead of bread. These will be covered throughout the consecration prayer and only be touched after my hands have been sanitised. I will then come to the congregation in your seats to give the wafers. I am to “drop” the wafer into your hands, you will then need to remove your mask, eat the bread and replace your mask. I will be wearing a PPE visor whilst I distribute the bread. Unfortunately, the congregation cannot have the wine at this time.

Some of you may be wondering about the Cornerstone Café. At this moment in time we believe the first thing to do is open the church and see how that is doing before we open the café. Since the lockdown several people have stepped down and quite a few of our volunteers are in the vulnerable group and will not be able to return. As a result of this, we are currently waiting upon the Lord to see how and when to proceed. Whatever we do, it will have to be different and maybe for a season be slimmed back to a more manageable, sustainable level. For the time being it will have to be a “watch this space”.

All our ministries are currently in the balance. As we keep hearing, life may never be the same again after Covid. The Bible tells us about the way God prunes the vine to make it more fruitful, and maybe this is a pruning season we are in.

He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. (John 15:2)

I do hope you feel positive about the church opening for worship and all the plans and preparations that have been put in place. This is only Phase 2 we are entering, it is not the finished article (Phase 3), and I am sure it will need to be refined and altered as we go along. Please do be kind and loving towards each other and to those who are doing their very best in circumstances we have never had to face before. This situation is not easy, and opinions can be divided, but let us continue to love one another and work together to the glory of God.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)