



The Bishop of Norwich  
The Rt Revd Graham Usher

 THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND  
Diocese of Norwich

Eve of the Epiphany  
5<sup>th</sup> January 2021

## To the Licensed Clergy and Churchwardens of the Diocese of Norwich

Dear Colleagues,

Many of us have watched, with growing concern, the rise in the number of those testing positive for Coronavirus. The Prime Minister made a very clear statement last night about our need to stay at home for the coming weeks.

Within the new rules outlined by the Prime Minister permission is given to *“attend places of worship for a service. However, you must not mingle with anyone outside of your household or support bubble. You should maintain strict social distancing at all times.”*

There is also this: *“Funerals can be attended by a maximum of 30 people. Linked religious, belief-based or commemorative events, such as stone settings and ash scatterings can also continue with up to 6 people in attendance. Anyone working is not counted in these limits. Social distancing should be maintained between people who do not live together or share a support bubble. Weddings and civil partnership ceremonies must only take place with up to 6 people. Anyone working is not included. These should only take place in exceptional circumstances, for example, an urgent marriage where one of those getting married is seriously ill and not expected to recover, or is to undergo debilitating treatment or life-changing surgery.”*

I understand that the government may issue further regulations in the coming days about places of worship. The Church of England’s guidance is being continually updated at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches>

I am very grateful for how clergy and lay leaders have enabled public worship and times for individual prayer to be held as safely as possible over these months. Thank you for your part in that.

I last wrote on Christmas Eve and said that *“our priority must be to look out for our neighbours and protect the vulnerable. I urge you to be exceptionally careful.”* That remains the case. I am particularly concerned because public worship brings elderly and vulnerable people together and the new strain of Covid is more infectious. Yet, this needs to be balanced with real concerns about isolation, loneliness and mental well-being. We need to be extremely cautious and protect people, whilst also being ministers of hope at this time. For me, loving our neighbours at this time means keeping them safe (even when some are resistant).



I reiterate that **I give permission to incumbents, in consultation with their churchwardens and PCCs, to cancel services for the duration of this lockdown if that is what is determined locally. Together with the other Bishops and Archdeacons, I will back whatever decision you reach.**

I would hope that an online alternative could be provided (or signposted to other provision, including our diocesan *Sunday Hope* podcasts which are produced with music from the Cathedral and are also available to listen to on the telephone <https://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/news/podcast-sunday-hope/> ). It is my ardent hope that clergy and/or lay leaders continue to pray regularly in their churches and that as many churches as possible remain open for the solace of individual prayer.

I ask that where church buildings remain open for individual prayer and/or public worship that risk assessments should be reviewed. All mingling before and after worship needs to be rigorously discouraged.

**Please could you send an email to your Archdeacon with a very brief summary of benefice/team plans for the coming weeks so that we can support you if asked?**

Clergy and others who are shielding should certainly feel no compulsion to be leading physically present worship.

I remain hugely grateful for your ministry during these days. We must continue to pray for each other, for the communities we serve, for our NHS and for those charged with protecting the nation.

On this eve of the Epiphany, I was drawn during my morning prayers to travel alongside the Magi on their long journey of hope. Their guiding light led them forward until it stopped over a house in Bethlehem and they were '*overwhelmed with joy*'. My prayer is that we will be guided through what may feel a long Epiphany journey, travelling hopefully, and holding the overwhelming joy of Christ in our hearts.

With my prayers for each of you, giving thanks for the many epiphanies of the Lord that we witness in our life together.

Yours sincerely.

+ Graham Norrie: