

Our Ref: +PBW--+RT-ADs/ajh

10 June 2020

To: All Licensed Clergy, All Chaplains, Churchwardens and Chapelwardens, Parish Officers, All Readers, PTO, Honorary Assistant Bishops, Area Deans, Assistant Area Deans, Lay Deans, Deputy Lay Deans, Diocesan Staff, Diocesan Registrar

Dear Sisters and Brothers

The Next Phase of Opening Our Churches

We continue to pray for you all and we are hugely appreciative of the sacrifices you have made, particularly recognising the anguish felt by many due to our inability to celebrate the Eucharist. However, we have also been amazed at the extraordinary and creative ways in which you have continued to live and tell the story of God's love for the world as seen in Jesus. The words of Paul to the church in Philippi seem very relevant...

'I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus'

So, **thank you** for all you are and give. And thank you too for the messages of love and care to us. We value the knowledge that we are prayed for.

You will know that the Government announced last weekend that it hopes that churches may open for individual private prayer from next Monday 15 June. You may have wondered why we didn't write earlier about this. Although the Church of England has been part of the discussions about the phased re-opening of churches, the group involved were only informed of the changed announcement in the hour before it was made. We chose to write today as the House of Bishops met yesterday to finalise the guidance to be issued. You will find the updated guidance on our

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<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/mediacentre/news/bishops-revise-and-produce-further-guidance>

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Please do take time to read the various guidance documents as they contain much valuable information. We have also invited Area and Lay Deans to meet with us tomorrow afternoon for the opportunity to raise further questions and concerns.

You may remember that we had expected that the second phase of re-opening would be a move to small funerals and wedding services prior to open access for individual prayer. We understand that the Government reversed this approach due to anxiety raised by some other countries which suggest that places of worship and particularly the celebration of weddings, may be epicentres for a second spike in the virus.

This means that we are writing to you to confirm that we should engage in the conversations and preparation for potential re-opening of our churches for individual prayer and you will find the earlier advice as to the practical steps on the website. We know that this will be a source of joy for many and offers the comfort and strength of the 'thin places' our buildings often express to both congregations and the wider community of our villages and towns.

It is important however that this is seen as permission that your church building **may** move to this phase, not that it **must**. Your local risk assessment and decision must take into consideration both concerns for the building and those of clergy and laity who may have personal risks to consider. And do please remember that all this needs to be agreed between PCC and Incumbent. May we remind you that those who are over 70 are at greater risk of the virus and there will be clergy who may need to take account of other health concerns. No one should feel impelled in any way to undertake this re-opening.

It is important also to recognise that the Government may decide not to confirm the 15 June as the date for opening for individual prayer if the scientific and medical advice considers this unwise if the R number continues to remain high in the South West. In addition, we still await clarification from the Government as to whether 'supervision' of our buildings is required whilst they are open, and what this means. We would therefore suggest that in the preparations you make, **if** your church is to reopen, that you include in your risk assessment the need for supervised access.

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Questions about funerals and weddings have been received by us on a regular basis. This has also been under regular review in the national conversations. If your church is to reopen for prayer, then you may also permit funerals to take place in your church building in keeping with the guidance on the website

<https://www.bathandwells.org.uk/supportingparishes/ministry-support-vacancies/coronavirus-guidance-and-resources/preparing-to-open-our-buildings/> Cont'd ... Page 3

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Weddings are still not permitted by law in either registry offices or church buildings. We are aware of the distress this is causing to couples in our own communities and indeed the Church is pressing for consistency in allowing this to happen as soon as is possible.

You will notice that advice which in the past, has been offered more centrally and generally is increasingly requiring local decisions dependant on your context. For example, if you do reopen, the numbers that could be accommodated in a local church for a funeral service will need careful thought in terms of safe distancing. Again, this needs to be agreed by the PCC and Incumbent in the risk assessment.

The advice about singing has not changed. While it is under review and is being considered in the light of research, this means that no singing is allowed at present.

Other worship services are also under discussion but again we need to stress that worship gatherings, including those outside, are not yet permitted. You can be assured that we will share with you any changes as they become possible.

It is important however to always remember that whilst church buildings remain closed, the Church remains fully open and it has been a delight to see the stories of innovative worship, the deepening of prayer and the commitment to service within our communities, churches and schools. Thank you!

Please direct any questions to your deanery leaders who can bring them to our Zoom call tomorrow.

With our love and prayer

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