

# Wigston Benefice

A Pastoral Letter from Fr Trevor & Fr Chris

25<sup>th</sup> July 2021

Dear all,

Following the verbal notices on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> July and having had chance to discuss the new guidance as a ministry team, we thought that we should put our thoughts and decisions in writing.

Amongst everything that's going on at the moment, we're very conscious that there's a diversity of feelings, opinions and approaches to the relaxations in lockdown restrictions since 19<sup>th</sup> July. In terms of the Church of England advice, whilst various things that had previously been restricted or prohibited are now permissible, the tone of the advice is still very cautious and also places overall responsibility on the clergy to make decisions appropriate to the local situation. In making the decisions below, we have kept in mind the feedback we've received from some of you along with the overall context of the churches within the Benefice and the situation nationally.

Although the vaccination programme appears to be doing good things in terms of restricting hospitalisations and deaths, the infection rate is very high and the long-term implications remain unknown. With this in mind, we have decided to continue with our initial cautious and gradual approach to relaxing restrictions.

The main points are:

**\*Face Coverings are still strongly encouraged** (*unless you would previously have been exempted*). We appreciate that they're uncomfortable and that we can't make them mandatory. Like many other organisations, however, we strongly encourage their continued use because they also provide protection in relation to aerosol-based transmission. This is one of those situations where we ask you to think of the risk to others as well as yourselves. The clergy will continue to wear a face mask to administer communion too.

**\*Social distancing will be retained.** People are now free to sit with people from other households if they so wish – this is a matter for you to decide with others. We will, however, continue to keep the 2m distance between the pews & rows of chairs. This is to allow people the choice to remain distanced from one another. If you do choose to sit with another group, please bear in mind the potential implications should someone in that group contract the virus.

As a rule of thumb, please:

- \*Don't just plonk yourself down next to someone without asking!
- \*Don't be afraid to point out that you'd prefer to remain distanced if that's your wish.
- \*Respect one another's wishes and space.

**\*Please mingle outside.** Whilst the weather is on our side over the summer, make the most of the fresh air to chat and catch up. We fully appreciate it's an important aspect of our shared life as Christians, but let's do it responsibly and seek to reduce the risk.

**\*Test & Trace.** We'll continue to keep a note of who has attended services just in case we need to contact you in the event of an outbreak.

**\*Sharing the peace and sharing the chalice.** It's a no from us for now. Again, we fully appreciate that not sharing the peace is a sad absence for many and misses an important aspect of our shared life, but mingling and physical contact at the moment seems like a step too far. Sharing the chalice seems equally imprudent under the circumstances. We'd also point out that we have to consume what's left - which doesn't fill us with confidence! Meanwhile, a repeated reassurance that receiving in one kind only is still sufficient and complete in terms of receiving the sacrament. We appreciate that the symbol is impaired though and it may well feel that something is 'missing'.

**\*Singing will be phased back in *gradually* over the summer.** On pastoral grounds, we've agreed that singing can resume for weddings and funerals with immediate effect, though with some reservations. As regards Sundays, because there's some question about whether singing should best be done behind masks and also quite how effective or satisfactory that would actually be, we would rather hold off for a little bit longer. This is partly to see what the experience of others is elsewhere, but also to give opportunity to see how things develop in terms of infection rates nationally and locally. We'll review things further later in August. As musicians ourselves, we're very much missing singing too and look forward to being able to sing again in worship with confidence.

**\*Lateral flow testing.** If you're not already doing this, can we encourage you to consider doing so? As the virus is frequently asymptomatic, the lateral flow tests can be a first line of defence in identifying people who are infected, in a timely manner. The test kits can be ordered online or picked up from many high street chemists. Covid-testing is not a pleasant experience by any means, but it's a helpful tool. We're not asking you to do anything that we're not willing to do ourselves - the clergy are doing regular lateral flow tests too.

In conclusion, we're very conscious that this letter will bring a mixture of relief and disappointment, depending on how you feel about the current situation. We hope, however, that you will be able to understand where we're coming from with our duty of care to all of our congregations. Whilst it might feel that we've opted for the 'lowest common denominator', we hope that it might be seen more as an effort to maintain the ability to worship God together, in person - something that we have missed so much over the last 18 months. We also hope that this will provide a way forward which allows the greatest number of people to gather together confidently in the face of significant amounts of concern and anxiety. We look forward to, and pray for, the days when we can continue to enrich our shared worship even more.

As ever, we're happy to answer any questions you might have. For now, we assure you of our continued prayers and best wishes,

*Fr Trevor*

*Fr Chris*