

**To all clergy and licenced lay ministers
cc Churchwardens**

Date: 24 June 2020
Our ref: MJS/rhw-bp9090

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Yesterday, the government announced that from 4th July, places of worship can re-open for public worship. Similarly, weddings can take place from that date. While in many ways this is very welcome news, we are also aware that it will be greeted with mixed feelings by some in the diocese. As we have said in previous letters, we know that the work involved in re-opening churches will make this very hard, and for some churches and clergy (in particular those shielding), it will simply not be possible. Please hear us when we say, loud and clear, you should not feel that you must re-open immediately. You should only do so if you are confident it can be done safely, in accord with government and church guidelines (which are likely to be updated in the next few days).

We are stressing this point because the feedback given to us by incumbents (and thank you to all who completed the questionnaire) made it clear that nearly 50% of incumbents felt 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about the re-opening of their buildings, and around 40% thought it was 'unlikely' or 'very unlikely' that you would be able to implement changes within the government's timescale. So, while we fully anticipate that some churches will have public services again on Sunday 5th July, many will not – and that is okay! All we would ask, is that you make it very clear on your website, church notice board (and other means) what you are doing, how you are doing it (safety measures in place if you are re-opening, and early warning that services will be very different e.g. no congregational singing), why you are doing it (concerns over safety if you are not re-opening) and if you have any idea of timescale for further changes e.g. 'we will review the situation again at the beginning of September'. And if you are not opening, you may also want to direct people to a nearby church which is open. Clear communication will be very important.

We also realise that, whatever your decision, there are likely to be people who disagree with you! Please feel free to show them this letter or refer them to your Archdeacon if you feel under pressure.

Weddings

While the government have given permission for weddings to take place from 4th July (with a maximum of 30 people), we would advise you to speak to the Diocesan Registrar if you have weddings booked in the coming weeks. There may still be complications over the legalities, and we would urge you to check before finalising anything with couples.

Funerals

When the crisis broke, we decided to waive fees for all funerals. This gesture was welcomed by many although it has reduced our income at a time when there are many other uncertainties about our

financial position. We have now taken the decision to reinstate fees from 1st July i.e. any funeral on or after 1st July incurs the standard fees. (However, if the funeral has already been booked before 1st July in the expectation that fees would be waived, you may honour that arrangement.) Please liaise with the Finance Team if you have any questions about this.

Church is changing

Over recent months, we have spoken often of church changing. We have learnt more about everyday prayer, everyday witness and everyday action in very different circumstances. Some of us have learnt a lot about online worship and about pastoral care in a time of crisis. Most of us are quite clear that we don't want to simply go back to doing things the way they were done before.

Without going into a lot of detail at this point in time, we simply want to urge you to continue to reflect on all you have learnt in this period and how you apply that learning in this next phase of our life together. Some of you will want to carry on with online worship – this is a great way to connect with new people (we've heard some amazing stories of people coming to faith in recent weeks) – but please don't try to do everything. The changes ahead will be demanding. The Diocesan Mission and Ministry Team will continue to provide opportunities for reflection and shared learning in the coming months.

The Bishop's Leadership Team has also been reflecting in recent weeks about how we keep an outward focus to our church life even as we go through this next transition. It would be very easy for the practicalities of church worship to occupy all our attention while many in our society continue to grieve and to suffer (the economic situation will bring severe challenges to the most vulnerable). For this reason, we will be inviting you in the coming weeks to explore with your local communities how we nurture hope and work together for the common good. Under the banner 'Together in Hope', we will suggest some very simple ways to get people talking and working together. The Cathedral will launch this with a virtual board inviting visitors to write about what it means to be 'together in hope'. We want to stress that this will be an invitation – not every church will want to participate – but we will be offering practical support. More information will follow.

We will also be facilitating conversations with every parish and fresh expression of church in the autumn to explore together with you new patterns of church life and ministry that we may want to develop for the future in the light of our changed context. We will be in touch after the summer with more details on how we hope to hear your ideas and reflections.

Holidays

Finally, a note on holidays – primarily aimed at stipendiary clergy. The past weeks and months have been disruptive in so many ways, impacting on our usual routines and rhythms of life, including our times of rest. We are conscious that many employers are informing staff (both those on furlough and those working) that they must take a proportion of their leave in the coming weeks and cannot carry over leave to next year.

For clergy things are seldom that clear cut, even for those on Common Tenure, where annual leave allowance is specified. Being Office Holders provides a degree of flexibility and as we've said before in this diocese, we prefer to encourage a culture which is permissive rather than prescriptive. We realise that for several of you there has been real disappointment in having to cancel planned holidays and you may be holding out in the hope of rescheduling at some unknown point in the future. At the same time, some have had barely any time off since Christmas and we are noticing increased levels of tiredness. We have a responsibility to look after ourselves and time off is essential if we are to stay well.

All this leads us to say that we want to encourage you to think very carefully about your own situation and consider prayerfully how best you might get necessary rest over the summer period so that come the autumn you feel as refreshed as possible. The situation will of course be different for each of you and will depend on a variety of circumstances including whether you live on your own or with others. We are not therefore setting any hard and fast rules about when to take leave, but we urge you to take at least some time off over the next two to three months. Even if you can't get away as planned it will be important to have a break from routines, to experience a change of pace and to focus on different priorities – in short, to disrupt the normal rhythms of working life.

For both of us (like many of you) our summer holiday plans are unclear. It's likely we'll have to make changes. But we are both committed to keeping at least two weeks clear from work and finding ways to rest, relax and feel rejuvenated.

Whatever your decision, please discuss your plans with colleagues – churchwardens, ministry team and deanery colleagues. If you do go away, it is important that you have cover for pastoral work and occasional offices, even if you are not yet holding Sunday services in your building, and it is important that others know who to contact.

A word of thanks

This has been an extraordinary three months – most of us have never known anything like it in our lives before. As we come to the end of this particular phase of the lockdown in this country (remembering that other parts of the world are still in the peak of the pandemic), so we want to express our sincere and heartfelt thanks for your fellowship and ministry in this time. We have been so encouraged by the response of the whole diocese. There have been so many acts of selfless love and kindness. We have seen real generosity and creativity, and we have heard of many people growing in their everyday faith. And all this in the midst of real challenges.

Please accept our warm thanks for all you are and all you have been doing.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” *Romans 15: 13*

Yours in Christ,



The Rt Revd Martyn Snow
Bishop of Leicester



The Rt Revd Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani
Bishop of Loughborough