

**To all clergy and lay ministers (including PTO)
Cc Churchwardens and DBF staff**

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

May the light and peace of Christ be with you this Epiphany season. I want to start by thanking you for your ministry during Advent and Christmas, and I hope that you managed to enjoy some rest and refreshment over the New Year period.

Once again, I am writing to you in view of the imposition of a national lockdown. The implications of this latest lockdown are clearly very serious, and my prayers are with those who are unwell, those who must shield and those who are anxious. In addition, Bishop Guli and I are also writing this week to hospital chaplains and NHS staff, and to our school head-teachers with a message for their staff and students. Although our words of thanks and encouragement can seem such a small gesture in the face of the overwhelming challenges they are facing, we feel that it is important to persevere and show our appreciation. We know that you will be doing the same in your own locality as well as supporting all critical workers (noting that 'religious staff' are included as critical workers whose children can attend school).

The rules for places of worship in this national lockdown are that public worship and private prayer can continue but only with appropriate safety measures (in particular, mingling before or after services must be avoided). The decision regarding continuing public worship in the building now rests with the Incumbent and PCC, but I want you to know that as long as you have conducted a robust risk assessment, a decision to continue using the building will have my support. Similarly, I know that many of you have already taken the decision to cease in-person public worship and I want you to know that this also has my full support as long as you are clear in communicating the alternatives on offer e.g. online services, phone support and national church resources. Now more than ever, people need to know that the church is there for them, even if they can't attend in person. Please continue to check the [diocesan](#) and [national](#) church websites regularly for updates.

How long, O Lord?

We now face the distinct possibility that we will arrive at the one-year anniversary of the first national lockdown with the country still in some form of lockdown. And while the vaccines now offer some light in the darkness, it is increasingly clear that the effects of this global crisis will be long lasting and far-reaching.

My reading over the New Year has been Pope Francis' latest book *Let Us Dream*. In this short and accessible book, the Pope offers his reflections on the multiple crises facing humanity. Three things in particular struck me: firstly, his very personal sharing of his own struggles and vulnerability; secondly, his assessment of the choices that the church and society must make in response to the crises; and thirdly, his emphasis on our connectedness, both as human beings and as co-workers in caring for all creation.

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Pope Francis shares openly about his own struggles, not only now but also at previous times in his life – his life-threatening illness as a young man training for the priesthood; his ‘exile’ studying in Germany where he felt completely isolated and far from his home in Argentina; and his ‘exile’ when, after years of senior leadership in the Jesuit movement, he was side-lined and disciplined for his unpopular style of leadership. Such crises, he says, made him focus on the core of his faith – his life of prayer and the facing of temptations – but they also made him reassess the habits which had shaped his life up to that point, some of which needed to be discarded and replaced with new, Christ-centred habits. Such is the nature of crises and the power they have to force us to change.

But we still have choices about how we will respond. Here I found myself relating to Pope Francis’ own temptations which he describes as the temptation to retreat into yourself and shut out the world or the temptation to be over-active, trying to solve the world’s problems. Neither response is healthy, but the only way to avoid them is to discern the prompting of the Holy Spirit, to be open to God’s ‘nudges’ towards love, kindness and generosity, and to talk with others who are similarly trying to discern what God is saying and doing in the midst of the crises.

Finally, I was struck by the Pope’s account of his own ‘conversion’ to the importance of our connection with all of creation. He describes how, in the past, he found himself annoyed by constant talk about the environment (which for him was his Brazilian neighbours highlighting the plight of the Amazon rainforest), but this has gradually changed, and the environment has now become one of his own priorities, both personally and for the Roman Catholic Church. Again, I related to this as the past nine months for me have involved a lot more gardening, walks in the countryside and cycle rides – in short, I have felt connected to nature in a whole new way. And I can’t help wondering if this may be true for many other people (not forgetting that some have not had the luxury of extra time or space for these things).

So Pope Francis encourages us to dream of a better future. He dares to imagine a future where the crises of our present have forced us to learn what it means to be connected to God, to one another and to the whole of creation. Perhaps this is a useful reminder as we embark on the *Shaped by God Together* process in the diocese. I wonder how this process can help us dream, help us discern what God is saying and help us shape a new future?

I will be in touch again soon to share dates for the various meetings related to *Shaped by God Together* including the Bishops’ Days for clergy and lay ministers in March. However, we are keeping this process under review in the light of the current circumstances. As things stand, we hope to proceed with the planned meetings for February and March e.g. Bishop’s Council (with Area Deans and Lay Chairs) and Diocesan Synod (all online) but these meetings will include a review of the timeframe and scope of the *Shaped by God Together* process (understanding that any decision to delay or reduce the scope would in itself have far-reaching implications). We would ask for your prayers for this process, and also for those who will be licensed and commissioned as lay ministers at the *Called Together* service at the end of January (which will also be online) and, of course, for Bishop Guli in her forthcoming transition to Chelmsford.

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Living in Love and Faith Resources

I also want to update you on the work of the diocesan Living Well Together Group which completed the LLF study course just before Christmas. The Group is meeting again on 19th January to review the course together, but some members have already submitted written feedback. On the whole, this feedback has been positive with Group members appreciative of the opportunity to talk together and engage with the carefully structured course material. We hope therefore to be able to recommend the course to the diocese once we have fully reviewed the feedback.

However, the written feedback contains some concerns and as we know that some churches are planning to start the course in the next few weeks, we would encourage you to make contact with the Group to learn from our initial experience (livingwelltogether@leccofe.org). The Group's concerns were primarily around how to make the course a 'safe space' for all participants (especially given the dynamics of engaging over Zoom); how to ensure a depth of engagement with good listening across difference (our 90 minute sessions were generally thought to be too short given the quantity of video content); how to ensure diversity among group participants (any one church doing the course on their own may not be able to engage well with those of very different views); and also some concerns over the perceived underlying philosophy of the course which appears to equally value all approaches. Above all, we would want to emphasise that good facilitation of the course is essential and our diocesan Group members may be able to offer advice and support on this. We will share further feedback and comments when the Group reports to Diocesan Synod on 24th March.

Finally, I want to continue to encourage you to pay attention to your own wellbeing even as you serve others. Sadly, the early spring Bishops' retreat days at Launde Abbey have been postponed but the Launde ministry team are still offering [online quiet days and other resources](#). Similarly, the Community of the Tree of Life have produced various prayer resources which can be accessed from their [website](#). I hope and pray that you will be able to discern God 'nudging' you towards those practices which deepen your relationships with God, each other and all creation.

With continued thanks and prayers.

Yours in Christ,



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