

The Rt Revd Dr Michael Ipgrave

Bishop's House, 22 The Close, Lichfield WS13 7LG
T: 01543 306001. E: bishop.michael@lichfield.anglican.org



THE BISHOP OF LICHFIELD

30 November 2020

To: Clergy and licensed lay ministers in the Diocese of Lichfield

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As the period of national lockdown comes to an end on 2nd December, I am writing to thank you for all that you have done to sustain the life of our churches over the last four weeks, and to give some guidance on the resumption of public worship from this week. I am sorry that this is rather a long letter; please do take time to read it through to the end.

With Bishop Clive and Bishop Sarah, I am very grateful for the faithfulness, commitment and resourcefulness you have shown during this period of lockdown. Despite the government's requirement that public worship should cease, I believe that we have maintained a clear sense that the church is a praying and worshipping community in a number of ways: by broadcasting online services both from churches and homes; by keeping in touch with faithful Christians by post, phone, and in other ways; and by opening church buildings for private prayer. Many of you have continued to be extensively involved with funeral, bereavement and other pastoral ministries; our chaplains have worked in demanding circumstances in healthcare, education, prison and other settings; and our outreach of care and service in local communities has been a visible and practical expression of the faith which gives us hope. I know that this has been a costly time for each one of you, and for your families and all who give you support. I am proud and humbled to be the bishop of a diocese where priests, deacons and lay ministers give so generously of themselves, and I am more grateful than I can say to the very many of you who have written to tell me that you are praying for me and my colleagues. Please do be assured of my prayers for each of you.

From Wednesday onwards, our churches will once again be able to be open for public worship. This is a very timely opportunity for us to welcome people back to our church buildings, particularly in the weeks leading up to Christmas and at Christmas itself. This will be important not only for our faithful members, but also for the many who are likely to be spiritually seeking for truth at this time. We have the greatest story ever to tell, and the surest ground of hope ever to offer, in Jesus Christ, and I know that you and your churches will want to do all that you can to make available to all the wonderful and transformative message of Christmas. Over this year, many of you have worked hard to communicate through different online platforms, and Advent and Christmas will provide new openings for that; but people will also want to visit in person the church buildings they know and love, and you will want to be able to welcome them warmly and safely. To that end, I draw your attention to three important points of guidance for worship in the coming weeks.

1. COVID safety

It is essential that, as public worship resumes, we keep to the high standards of COVID-safety which we have developed over this year; it is only because of the commitment of places of worship to providing a safe environment that the ban on services has been lifted. The use of face coverings, the maintenance of social distancing, the registration of worshippers for test-and-trace, the careful cleaning of church buildings, hand sanitising and other measures continue to be necessary.

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In the lead-up to Christmas, please do check regularly for updates on guidance posted on our [diocesan website](#) and on the Church of England [national website](#); the latter is particularly helpful on what is allowed in terms of singing, including at indoor and outdoor carol services. Some regulations may vary from area to area according to the tiers to which places are allocated. At the moment, the eastern part of the diocese (Staffordshire, Stoke, Wolverhampton and the Black Country) is in Tier 3, and the western part (Shropshire and Telford) in Tier 2; in both tiers, the current limits on attendance at funerals and weddings are 30 and 15 respectively.

2. Administration of Holy Communion

One of the greatest joys of the end of lockdown will be the ability to share together once more in the celebration of the Eucharist. I have been most encouraged by the care taken by churches across the diocese to ensure that this is organised in a safe way, and of course this must continue.

Safety has necessitated the temporary removal of the common cup or chalice in communion. As a result, the normative pattern for administering the sacrament has been distribution in one kind only, as consecrated bread. This continues to be an entirely appropriate approach for you to adopt in your churches, and those who receive in this way should be assured that they receive the fulness of Christ's presence and blessing in consuming the bread only. As the risen Christ cannot be divided, so his life and grace is given to us wholly under either or both of the forms of bread and wine.

However, some have understandably felt a strong wish to receive the sacrament as both bread and the wine. I am therefore attaching a letter from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, which accompanies and commends a procedure for simultaneous administration of bread and wine. This is offered as one possible means of distribution, subject to the agreement of incumbent and PCC; it stands alongside communion in one kind as an alternative, rather than a replacement. As you will see from the Archbishops' letter, the House of Bishops is committed to further work on this and other issues relating to the Eucharist. Please keep us in your prayers as we engage with these important and complex questions.

3. Canonical dispensations

Once the government's prohibition of public worship is lifted, canonical requirements to ensure the offering of worship **in each benefice** (or plurality) on Sundays (and at Christmas) come back into force. Set out in Canons B11 and B14, these are explained in more detail on the [Church of England website](#).

Recognising that churches will want to be at their most welcoming and accessible at this time of year, but recognising also that the stringent requirements of COVID-safety mean that reopening churches for worship will require a great deal of work for clergy, ministers and volunteers, my directions for this diocese are as follows:

- *I strongly encourage you to ensure that churches are open for public worship on Sundays from 6th Dec onwards, and at Christmas (see below re Sun 27th Dec).*
- *If you feel it will not be practically feasible to open safely on Sun 6th Dec, canonical requirements for that day only may be dispensed without further process.*

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- Any requests for dispensations for Sun 13th Dec, Sun 20th Dec or Christmas itself should be addressed to your area bishop (or to me in the case of the Stafford Episcopal Area), explaining the particular circumstances lying behind the request.
- All churches are dispensed from canonical obligations for Sun 27th Dec, though of course the offering of services on that day is to be commended where feasible.
- If you feel it will not be practically feasible to open safely on Sun 3rd Jan 2021, canonical requirements for that day only may be dispensed without further process.
- Any requests for dispensations for Sun 10th Jan, Sun 17th Jan, Sun 24th Jan or Sun 31st Jan should be addressed to your area bishop (or to me in the case of the Stafford Episcopal Area), explaining the particular circumstances lying behind the request.

Guidance on how to apply for a dispensation is on our [diocesan website](#).

If there is any Sunday on which an in-person service will not be provided, it would be good if you could encourage those of your people who can to join in an online service. In particular, you might like to draw their attention to the sung service of the Eucharist which will be livestreamed from [our Cathedral](#) every Sunday at 10.30am. Please also remember to update your A Church Near You and your web or social media sites with the details of your in-person and/or online services.

Finally, as I mentioned above, I know that many of you are feeling tired, and I would remind you of the importance of ensuring that you take time for relaxation and recreation, particularly in the weeks following Christmas. To this end:

- If you are a stipendiary or house-for-duty priest, deacon or lay minister and you have not managed to take the full annual leave due to you in 2020, I encourage you to carry forward up to two weeks of that into the new year, and to plan ahead to make sure you take advantage of that.
- If you are a non-stipendiary priest, deacon or lay minister, please make a priority of consulting with the person overseeing your ministry to ensure you take adequate time off.
- Please remember that each month stipendiary clergy are entitled to a week with two days off.
- On each of the Sundays 3rd, 10th, 17th, 24th and 31st January, I and the area bishops will record a sermon, on video and with printed text, to be an additional resource for you to deploy in worship should you wish to do so. Details will be available on our website in due course.

This comes with my warm good wishes and thanks, with my prayers that this season of Advent may kindle hope in your hearts, and looking forward expectantly to the joy of Christmas,

Your brother and bishop,

Michael Ickh: