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THE BISHOP OF LICHFIELD

8th February 2021

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Next week, Ash Wednesday (17th February) marks the beginning of Lent. That season of grace both invites us to walk more closely with our God and also prepares us to celebrate the joy of the resurrection. In this year's circumstances of restriction and separation, I believe that there are new opportunities for prayer and reflection, and a new hunger for hope and joy. With Bishop Clive, Bishop Sarah and Matthew our new Episcopal Vicar, I am therefore writing to express our appreciation for all you are giving in ministry and service, to assure you of our prayers, and to set out some guidance for the coming weeks.

1. **Ash Wednesday** will necessarily be kept at home by most of us this year, as the great majority of churches in the diocese are currently closed for public worship. In fact, this annual reminder of our mortality and of our need to seek out the mercy of God is well adapted to domestic observance. Whether as individuals or as members of a family, household or support bubble, the traditional marking with ash can be easily done in the home. I am enclosing to this end a simple form from the Church of England, which can either be used on its own or combined with an online service. I also attach a letter from Canon Andrew Stead, our Canon Precentor, with more background on Ash Wednesday and an open invitation to join online in the Cathedral's celebrations of the Eucharist on Ash Wednesday at 12.30pm and 7.30pm. For those for whom this may be helpful, I have also recorded a short video reflection for Ash Wednesday, which is available on our [diocesan website](#). I would be grateful if you could please bring these various opportunities and resources to the attention of your people before the beginning of Lent.
2. **Lent** itself will no doubt be kept in many different ways, this year as every year, but I would encourage you to see in our current situation an invitation to explore more deeply the inward, reflective and prayerful dimension of our Christian life of faith. There is a huge diversity of resources available to support such an exploration in this season, and as a diocese we are particularly hoping that people will engage in a fresh encounter with the guidance and challenge of the scriptures as they relate to contemporary issues: some suggestions as to how that might be done are included on our [diocesan website](#). I anticipate that there will also be creative suggestions on the [Church of England website](#) for Lenten activities in the home, and I urge you to check regularly on the provision there. Most of all, whether as individuals, as households, or as online groups and gatherings, I

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hope that we can all use these great Forty Days to grow in knowledge of the gospel and of its transformative power in our lives.

- Holy Week and Easter** will be celebrated in conditions which it is simply not possible to predict at the time of writing. In the week before Palm Sunday, Tuesday 23rd March will mark the first anniversary of the initial lockdown, and that will surely be a time for looking back to acknowledge and lament all that has been lost over the year. We will then turn, in our journey through Holy Week, to the Easter joy which is given us precisely at the darkest of times. Whether in physically gathered worship, in online communities, or through other ways of keeping in touch, Easter this year should be a point at which we are able to give a message of hope to our communities, which need that so much. In preparation for Easter, I am inviting you all this year to join me online on **Maundy Thursday, 1st April at 11am**, for a celebration broadcast from our Cathedral. In that service (which this year will not be a Eucharist), I will invite you to renew your ordination vows and commitment to ministry, and we will bless and consecrate for the coming year the oils of healing, of catechumens and of chrism.
- In the present**, we must continue to exercise great caution and care, for ourselves but also for one another. I have appended to this letter my general guidance for the current situation, particularly in relation to the quite small number of churches which are remaining open or which are considering re-opening. Please do read this carefully, please do check regularly for new guidance as this is posted on our [diocesan website](#) and on the [Church of England website](#), and please do consult with your archdeacon for matters on which you need detailed advice. Above all, please do pray for one another, and for me and for my brother and sister bishops, just as we pray for you. May our loving and merciful God bless us all in these coming days of Lent.

Your brother and bishop,

Michael Ipgrave