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To all Licensed Clergy and all Churchwardens

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

You will have received Bishop Christine's letter yesterday and we write now as archdeacons to assure you of our thoughts, prayers and support following the Prime Minister's latest announcement.

None of us wanted to begin the New Year in the severe situation in which we find ourselves, and we are well aware of the broad spectrum of thoughts and emotions experienced by leaders in our churches at this time – many of them painful. We know we are called to love our communities and this means offering spiritual nourishment and support, and exercising our duty of care – and this calling now becomes increasingly challenging as we learn more of the increased risk posed by the new variant of Covid 19.

The current lockdown does not mean the return to closed churches. We are permitted continue to meet for worship where it is safe to do so.

If you do choose as a church leadership to continue to offer face-to-face worship, it is essential to keep up to date with changing guidelines, as we learn more about increased transmission rates. There has been some suggestion from Public Health England that current risk assessment practice is based on the behaviour of the original virus strain and may not be sufficient to contain the new variant, but sadly little is understood so far about how or why transmissibility has increased. There is much we do not yet know about the new variant of the virus, so please redouble your efforts to minimise touching, sanitise hands, wear face coverings at all times and keep a clear record of attendance. You may want to consider reducing numbers admitted to church in order to increase distancing and enforce the two metre rule more strictly.

The latest guidelines are:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches>

Please do regularly check Church of England and Government websites for updates.

It is particularly important to emphasise to our communities that they MUST refrain from social mingling before and after worship. Worshippers must take their seat on entering church and leave the building immediately after worship ends, where possible by a different door from the one used for entry.

In many places, clergy, wardens and PCCs will decide it is not safe to meet for worship and will wish to return to offering worship exclusively online and via telephone conferencing, and the Bishop and archdeacons would like to stress that we fully support church communities who take this local decision.

This will depend on a variety of local factors, and we emphasize to you the principle of local decision making, shared between clergy and PCC.

With this letter we include an appendix with information about how to proceed if you decide to suspend face-to-face worship. Suspension for a short time does not require special dispensation, and it has now been decided that you may make a local decision without reference to the Bishop's office for the duration of the current lockdown period, until the Government review in late February, so up to and including Sunday 21st February. Please inform us for our records if you take this decision locally. If you decide to suspend worship for a longer period, you will require permission as described in the appendix.

We continue to praise God for the technologies available to us to keep in contact. Whether or not your parish continues to offer public worship, we urge you to care for yourselves and for one another by avoiding isolation, using all means available to keep in touch with one another, particularly the vulnerable and those living alone. It is so heartening to hear of the creative and innovative as well as simple ways people are supporting one another at this time – chats over garden walls and WhatsApp groups alike are bringing out the best in the Christian community as we seek to love and serve our wider communities. God is at work through his people sharing hope and love more than ever.

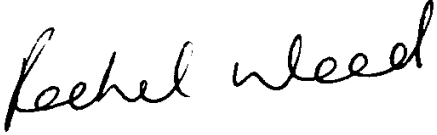
Please also consider especially all those in your communities who are working on the front line in the NHS, social care, education and other essential professions. You may never know how valuable they will find your prayers and words of support and appreciation.

We are both happy to hear from you if you would like to discuss your local situation and will be pleased to offer guidance, advice and support as we are able.

Yours in Christ,



The Venerable Dr Catherine Sourbut Groves
Archdeacon of Lindisfarne



The Rev'd Canon Rachel Wood
Acting Archdeacon of Northumberland

Appendix One

For Parishes Suspending Worship for a specified period

If, after discernment and consultation between clergy and PCC, you come to the conclusion it is not right to continue at this time to meet for worship, please make a submission to Rev'd Canon Pete Askew at the Bishop's Office, using the following guidance:

Dispensing with Worship during Lockdown

There are two ways in which a minister and PCC can legally dispense with worship in a church building during lockdown:

Where dispensation is required up until, and including, 21st February 2021

You do not need the Bishop's permission to dispense with worship in church buildings up until, and including, 21st February, by which time the government will have reassessed the current national Covid restrictions and a local assessment for the longer term can be made. During this period, the minister and the PCC(s) can agree a dispensation locally, the details of which should be set out in a formal resolution. This can be done by e-mail using the Church Representation Rules.

It is recommended that the resolution(s) of the PCC(s) take(s) the following form:

"The [rector] [vicar] [priest in charge] and the parochial church council of [*name of parish*] acting jointly authorise dispensing with the reading of Morning and Evening Prayer as required by Canon B 11 and the celebration of the Holy Communion as required by Canon B 14 on the following occasions:

Sunday 10th January, 2021

Sunday 17th January, 2021 *etc.*

The reason for the dispensation is that "in the light of the Government's guidance on preventing the spread of Coronavirus, there is no church in the benefice which can be used safely for public worship on those occasions."

If some services can go ahead but others cannot, the resolution may be edited accordingly. For example, where Morning and Evening prayer will be possible and Holy Communion will not, the reference to Morning and Evening prayer should be removed. Where Holy Communion may be possible on certain Sundays but not on others, it can be edited in respect of this as well.

Please can you inform the Bishop and Archdeacon if you have done this – this is not a legal requirement but will contribute towards seeing what is happening across the Diocese.

Where dispensation is required for a longer period, beyond the 21st February 2021

You will need the Bishop's dispensation, and a request for this should be made jointly by the minister and PCC to the Bishop.

In the request to the Bishop, a resolution made by the PCC(s) should be included, using the following recommended wording:

"The [rector] [vicar] [priest in charge] and the parochial church council of [*name of parish*] acting jointly request that the bishop authorise dispensing with the reading of Morning and Evening Prayer as required by Canon B 11 and the celebration of the Holy Communion as required by Canon B 14 on a regular basis [until *date*].

The reason for requesting the dispensation is that in the light of the Government's guidance on preventing the spread of Coronavirus, there is no church in the benefice which can safely be used for public worship and there is no reasonable prospect of any church in the benefice being made safe for that purpose [until at least *date*] because "

Again, the PCC(s) can be asked to deal with the matter under the correspondence procedure provided by the Church Representation Rules and the wording of the resolution can be changed to reflect what service patterns may be possible during this time.

If a benefice is vacant and no priest in charge has been appointed, the sequestrators (usually the Area Dean and Churchwardens) have responsibility for ensuring the performance of public worship.

The sequestrators should therefore act jointly with the PCC in dispensing with public worship on an occasional basis or making a request to the Bishop for dispensation on a regular basis.

Making a request to the Bishop for dispensation

To aid the Bishop's office in the preparation of the legal document required for a dispensation, please e-mail your request to Bishop Christine at bishop@newcastle.anglican.org including the following details:

1. Name of the Parish Church
2. Name of the Benefice
3. Date of start of Dispensation
4. Date of end of Dispensation
5. Any alternative arrangements for services to be held elsewhere, or online
6. Name of Incumbent, or Area Dean if in vacancy

Please also attach a copy of the signed PCC Resolution (scanned or photographed).

If you have any questions about a request for a longer-term dispensation, please contact the Rev'd Canon Pete Askew, Bishop's Chaplain, at p.askew@newcastle.anglican.org