

## **BISHOP'S BULLETIN No 34**

### **To the Licensed Clergy of Peterborough Diocese**

**10 January 2021**



Dear friends

#### **Open or Closed?**

I do hear the frustration of those who wish I would give a clearer steer, or preferably an instruction, about closing our churches for public worship. I do understand the cost and the pain of making these decisions in the parishes. I am aware of the tensions that can be caused between clergy and some of the laity. As far as I can legally, I will try to help. Do feel free to share what follows with your PCC and parishioners, if that might be useful.

Last March it was relatively easy. The government used emergency powers to close churches. All I had to do was tell the clergy to obey the law, and the government, for the sake of people's health and wellbeing. This time, to my surprise and dismay, both private prayer and public worship in church buildings were exempted from the lockdown regulations. I cannot legally tell a parish to close a church if the law permits it to stay open; all I can do is give permission for the suspension of public worship if the incumbent and PCC so request.

A church being open for private prayer is entirely a matter for the PCC. I have no authority over this. In normal times I would strongly encourage such opening, but these are not normal times. I think that now we need to follow the government's line and encourage people to stay at home except for what is essential.

On the matter of public worship, I repeat and clarify what I said last week: any parish which requests my permission to suspend public worship (technically, my dispensation from the relevant canons) will receive it, and this permission will remain in force as long as the parish is under government lockdown or in Tier 4 or Tier 3 of the coronavirus restrictions. I also repeat the permission I gave last year, for any priest holding my licence to preside at Holy Communion in their own home for a recorded or livestreamed service, again until the present restrictions are lifted.

You may be interested to know that around half our clergy have so far requested and received permission to suspend public worship, and that number is growing every day. If I am asked for my advice, it is certainly that you should close, while making whatever provision you can for your people to maintain their relationship with God and with one another.

This is a matter of serving the common good, of caring for the most vulnerable, of protecting your people and communities from a deadly disease. Please note that, unlike last year, there have been some hundreds of cases of the virus spreading through church choirs and congregations. It seems that the precautions we have been taking in our churches, for which I thank you so much, are pretty effective, but that the socializing which is still continuing before and especially after the act of worship, and the relative informality of choir rehearsals and robing, are causing the problem. If you could ensure that your people did not stop to talk to each other at all, they might be safe, but that is well-nigh impossible – and in any case fellowship is a major part of the reason we meet together, and is a basic human need.

You may have heard that some directors of public health (not yet in our area) have asked for places of worship to be closed down, as has the Mayor of London. I wouldn't be surprised if the government tightens the lockdown regulations to include churches at some stage – that is my view, and not based on any inside knowledge!

If you choose to remain open, please note that the rules on music have been tightened, so that singing is only permitted if it is essential to the act of worship (this applies to some Muslim worship, but I very much doubt that it applies in the Church of England). Please also make every effort to discourage socializing of any sort, not least in the vestry, on the way out of church, and in the car park.

### **Lent and Holy Week**

The current legislation keeps lockdown in place until the end of March, though we have been told that there might be some relaxations from late February. I think you should assume that the imposition of ashes will not be allowed on Ash Wednesday, 17 February. We will once again hold the renewal of ordination vows on Maundy Thursday (1 April) in two archdeaconry zoom meetings: further details will follow.

My series of seven half-hour talks on Hebrews, designed as a weekly Lent Course, but also usable as a replacement for our cancelled Bible Days, will be available from Monday 18 January: details next week. There will also be a study guide to follow, and I am grateful to those who are preparing that.

### **Shirley Westwood**

I am sorry to report that Shirley, widow of Bill, Bishop of Peterborough from 1984 to 1995, has died recently. Our deepest sympathy to their family.

With love in Christ

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