

OUR CHURCHES' RESPONSES TO THE CORONAVIRUS EMERGENCY

A Letter from Canon Godfrey Butland, to the Churches of the Cocker mouth Area Team, and Brigham, Clifton, Dean & Mosser.

Tuesday, 17th March 2020

Dear Friends,

These are strange times we are entering in our nation and our world. As citizens of earth and of heaven, we have a special part to play.

We have heard today that all church services and meetings are to be suspended. Our Archbishops have written, "Our life is going to be less characterised by attendance at church on Sunday, and more characterised by the prayer and service we offer each day." Further advice will follow, concerning our legal business, particularly AGMs. You can read the latest advice here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches#na>. There are several links you can follow.

Someone said to me yesterday, "We're all going to be monks now!" She was referring, of course, to the confinement many of us will have to accept – rather like monks in their 'cell'. (The word 'monk' come from the Greek *monos*, meaning 'alone'). But solitude – alone-ness – was only one aspect of the monastery. These were also places of *community*, where people prayed together, laboured together, learned together and cared for the poorest and weakest members of the neighbourhood. We have much to learn from these earliest experiences of church in our land: especially in the 'prayer and service' which our Archbishops suggest. Some of this will be 'virtual', via the internet or social media; some of it will be very personal and practical, according to circumstances. Here are just some of the things we are already exploring:

- Church buildings open for personal prayer
- Live streaming worship from Christ Church, via your computer (if you have one)
- Printed resources for prayer and Bible reading at home
- Organizing for the care of those who become isolated and need support
- Promoting church services via Radio Cumbria.

There will be more to follow. Meanwhile, I have called together our 'Hub Team'*, who will now meet with me weekly (so long as they remain healthy) for prayer, sharing of information, news updates, matters of pastoral concern, so that together we may share wisdom with others in leadership positions. In addition, we will want

to ensure that the elderly, the sick, the lonely, the vulnerable are all properly cared for, to the best of our ability.

Last Sunday, the team met to complete a 'Continuity Plan'. This provides for the continuation of our churches' life – its leadership and ministry, its organization and finance, its prayer and worship – while usual services and meetings are suspended, and particularly if a clergy member or church officer becomes ill.

We don't know, of course, when or where this will all end, but we have to take the long view. Our world will never be the same again. We may feel scared, insecure, uncertain, with nearly all our usual routines and meeting points disrupted. But already many public-spirited, compassionate people from our town and villages are organizing themselves to care for those who need help the most. We often see the best of humanity in times of crisis! Several church members are among these, reaching out to their neighbours.

I have a sense that, through the inevitable distress of these times, we might just discover afresh what it means to be human. We have, after all, come to live quite frenetic, complicated lives with expectations far beyond those of our forebears. Perhaps we have too much, and need to live more simply, more in harmony with each other and the beautiful world in which God has set us?

We might also discover afresh what it means to be church! "Being part of the Church of England will look very different in the days ahead," write the Archbishops. Let's see this as a time to get creative, use our imaginations, and ask 'how can we be church right where we are?' Let's see how we can serve our nation and our neighbourhood, in a Christ-like way.

Although we may be isolated, we need not be lonely. We can walk. Read. Watch TV, listen to music or the radio. Play with our children and (if permitted) our grandchildren. Write or email each other. Talk on the phone. And, above all, we can PRAY – find our heart's true home.

I would like to suggest that, in solidarity with each other, we pause to pray at 12 noon and 6pm each day, for the duration of this pandemic. More about that in a few days.

Finally (for now), two Scriptures which may help: Psalm 41.1-3 speaks of hope in God's power to heal; Hebrews 3.13-14 speaks of our need to persevere. Hope and perseverance: part of our gift to the world at this time, as citizens both of heaven and earth.

And here is a prayer:

Almighty and all-loving God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
we pray to you through Christ the Healer
for those who suffer from the Coronavirus across the world.
We pray too for all who mourn the loss

of someone who has died from the disease.
Give wisdom to policymakers, skill to healthcare professionals and researchers,
comfort to everyone in distress;
and a sense of calm to us all in these days of uncertainty and fear.
This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord
who showed compassion to the outcast, acceptance to the rejected,
and love to those to whom no love was shown. *(from the Church of Ireland - adapted)*

God be with you.

With love and prayer,

Godfrey

*The Hub Team has been meeting regularly with Godfrey, almost since he arrived in 2015. It's a kind-of home group for our clergy. It consists of Godfrey and Adrian; their wives Les and Lucy; Stuart and Deborah Hoddinott; Ann & Terry Peate; Gill Davidson; Caroline Tiffen.