



**THE DIOCESE
OF SHEFFIELD**

Renewed | Released | Rejuvenated

Coronavirus Ad Clerum 24062020

Dear friends in Christ

Alleluia, O sing to the LORD a new song; sing his praise in the congregation of the faithful.

Let Israel rejoice in their maker, the children of Zion be joyful in their king.

Let them praise his name in the dance; let them sing praise to him with timbrel and lyre. Psalm 149.1-3

Singing, and specifically congregational singing, is essential to the worship of the Church, just as it was to the worship of the Temple in the days of the Psalmist. The experience of God's goodness and grace is so deeply moving for the people of God that it demands expression in songs of praise. At least from time to time, even those of us who would not call ourselves musicians can't help but burst into joyful song.

So I found it a little jarring, at Morning Prayer earlier today, to read these words of the appointed Psalm, in the light of the surprisingly significant relaxing of restrictions around public worship announced by the Prime Minister yesterday. Unfortunately, even where public worship is resumed in our church buildings from 4th July, we are still going to have to wait for some time before, as the people of God, we can lift our voices in praise in congregational singing.

This latest communications update is to some extent simply a holding message. While some of the implications of the Prime Minister's announcement yesterday are clear, many are not and we are told that it will be some days before accompanying guidance is available from the government. We will of course provide further updates when that guidance is issued. For now, we trust it will be helpful if we say four things:

1. 'May' does not mean 'must'.

We are delighted that the government has issued permission for public worship in church buildings to be resumed from Saturday 4th July. It will have been over 15 weeks since the Archbishops anticipated the government by calling for a suspension of public worship and the deprivation has been costly for many of us.

But many restrictions will remain in force after 4th July, so that it is not simply a question of throwing open the doors of our churches and picking up where we left off on March 17. The most vital of these are outlined below. But not all our congregations are equally well placed to take the steps necessary to make public worship 'Covid-safe' and as with opening our churches for individual prayer, we are very keen to ensure that no congregation feels under pressure to resume public worship until it is confident that it can do so safely. Local circumstances will differ widely across the Diocese and we want to acknowledge that: ***the fact that we may resume public worship in our church buildings does not mean that we must.***

In particular, we realise that some of our clergy and lay leaders are in categories of significant personal risk in relation to the virus and so are having to shield themselves. Many of them have found wonderful ways of exercising their ministries remotely, and it is especially important that they are supported as they continue to guard their own health and wellbeing.

One option we warmly commend to the Diocese, especially where resources to make church buildings Covid-safe are stretched, is to put the new mission areas to good use, by working together to identify, and share responsibility for, one church building in a mission area in which public worship can be safely resumed.

2. The Dominical Sacraments are essential to the life of the Church

Having said that, it is also important to recall that the two sacraments instituted by the Christ Jesus (that is, baptism and the Lord's Supper) are not optional extras in the life of his Church! It is through baptism that we are united to Christ and are incorporated into his body, and it is through the eucharist that, sharing in the tokens of his body and blood, we are nourished as his body. Without baptism and eucharist there is no church.

We therefore anticipate that PCCs will wish to make progress towards a resumption of public worship, so that the members of the body of Christ can participate once more in these great mysteries – but (to repeat) at the pace which ensures the safety of all concerned.

In particular, we know how much many of our congregations will be looking forward to being able to participate once again in **the Eucharist**. However, we ask you please to note the following specific guidance in relation to eucharistic celebrations, in addition to the more general guidance in the next section:

- a. The **common cup** remains suspended, as does the sharing of the **Peace**. Communion is therefore in one kind for now.
- b. The **bread** may be administered from the hand of the celebrant into the hand of the recipient, but both are asked to wash / sanitize their hands before and after the administration. Both the celebrant and the recipient are asked to keep their arms at full extension at the moment of administration to maximise the distance between them.
- c. Peculiar as we know will seem for priest and people alike, we are advised that during the eucharistic prayer, if the celebrant is speaking over the elements, **a face-mask should be worn**.

3. Conditions to be met before any form of public worship is resumed

Further guidance is on the way, but you are strongly encouraged to familiarize yourself with the revised guidance already available on the Church of England website here. Among the steps that must be taken before public worship can resume in our church buildings are the following:

- a. A **risk assessment** must be made – you can find a template [here](#).
- b. **No accessories** (hymn and song books, service booklets, collection plates etc) can be used which would be handled by more than one person. Leaflets can be printed for single use (ie, to be taken away by those who use them at the end of a service).
- c. **Social distancing** must be observed (the 2 metre rule should not be collapsed to '1 metre +' unless there are truly exceptional reasons for doing so. Insurers are likely to advise caution here.). There is no universal maximum number of those who may gather for worship – the maximum must be determined locally by risk assessment, to ensure social distancing.
- d. **No singing** is permitted. (It is possible that further guidance will permit a single cantor / soloist to sing on behalf of the congregation, but at present no concession has been made.)
- e. **Gatherings** are expected to be **kept short**, without mingling for fellowship afterwards. (In essence, risk increases with duration)
- f. **Hand sanitizer** should be made available at the entrance and exit of the church building, and those who gather should be asked to use it as they arrive and as they leave. (Where possible, it is good for the entrance and exit to be through separate doors, to aid social distancing.)
- g. **Contact details** of those who gather should be requested and recorded on arrival, so that we can help with the 'track and trace' programme if any case of the virus is linked to a church service. (NB: no-one can be **required** to supply their details, only **requested**.)

4. Specific guidance in relation to weddings

It is a particular delight that wedding services are again possible in our church buildings. We know that many couples across the Diocese have been waiting for this moment. However, we also recognize that this is likely to be a particular point of pressure for some PCCs, where the resources to make a church building Covid-safe are very stretched. In circumstances where couples are requesting a wedding service before a PCC feels it can proceed with confidence, you are asked to contact your archdeacon.

Where a PCC is confident that it can make the church building Covid-safe and where there is a will to resume wedding services, the following guidance applies in addition to the section above.

a. Until regular weekly worship has resumed for long enough to have allowed banns to be read, the marriage will require a **common licence**. For this you are directed to our Registrar, Rachel Baseley, at the Sheffield Diocesan Registry, No 1 Velocity, 2 Tenter Street, Sheffield S1 4BY (0114 266 6660). If the volume of requests becomes unmanageable for the Registry, then we can fall back on an experienced team of surrogates who are able to issue Common Licences.

b. **30 people is an absolute ceiling** for the number of people who can be present in the church building – and that even that number assumes that social distancing is possible. In a small church building the PCC will have to determine the safe maximum number. Where the size of the building permits 30 people, the PCC must decide how many of the home team are required, since they count towards the total of 30. Obviously, this includes the officiating priest; but it might also usually include a vergers / sidesperson to assist the minister, not least because the total number in attendance will need to be monitored and occasionally policed. Likewise, the couple count! That will generally leave only a maximum of 26 other guests, including children and babies.

Meanwhile, we confirm that we are not intending at this stage to adjust the provisional plans we have made to delay the ordinations of priests and deacons until Michaelmas (the end of September). They were of course due to be ordained this coming weekend.

Today is the commemoration of the birth of John the Baptist. St Luke tells us (in 1.36) that his mother Elizabeth was 6 months into her pregnancy when Jesus was conceived. Once the Christian Church had settled on December 25th as the appropriate date on which to celebrate the Lord's nativity, it became obvious to celebrate the birth of John six months' earlier. Of course, that means we are now closer to Christmas 2020 than to Christmas 2019. The second half of this year remains full of uncertainty. Will there be a second wave of the virus and a second lockdown? Will restrictions remain in place throughout the remainder of this year? What will Advent and Christmas be like for us this year? We hope very much that it will, by then, be possible for our congregations to be singing once more, so that we are able to join our voices with those of the angelic host, praising God in that joyful chorus: *'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours'* (Luke 2.14)

Meanwhile, with every blessing

+ Pete Sheffield

The Rt Revd Dr Pete Wilcox
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