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A message from the vicar - keeping you informed

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Dear friends

I hope you and your loved ones are safe and coping with all that is going on. If you need any support or someone to talk to please contact us at helpinghand@christchurchalsager.uk or leave a message on our office phone 01270 872291 with your contact details.

We are living in difficult but interesting times. Who would have thought that if the doors of church buildings were closed, then more people would engage with the Church!

According to research launched by Tearfund there has been a significant rise in prayer during this crisis. A third of UK adults have prayed since the beginning of the pandemic. Of those surveyed, 30% of 18 – 34 year olds pray regularly, compared to 25 per cent of over 55s. Also, encouragingly, one in 20 UK adults who say they have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown have never gone to church before.

If you want to read more, check out this article from The Evangelical Alliance:
<https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/rise-in-prayer-and-religious-service-attendance-to-be-met-with-a-step-up-in-our-witness>

Like all organisations we need to plan how we exit lockdown well. I'm writing to you today to keep you updated on where we are with this.

In a case study on how to reopen, the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) has recommended that, "A collaborative approach is crucial to making it work" and "we need to work carefully, and cautiously, to protect health and the economy." Of course we are not a business, but these three elements, Collaboration, Care and Caution are sound biblical principles that seem particularly appropriate to us at this time.

- We are designed to relate and **collaborate** as *the body of Christ* (cf. 1 Corinthians 12.12-26).
- *Sensible people are **careful** to stay out of trouble, but stupid people are careless and act too quickly* (Proverbs 14.16 GNT).
- *The wise are **cautious** and avoid danger; fools plunge ahead with reckless confidence* (Proverbs 14.16 NLT).

We will use these principles as our guide, working collaboratively to plan what we do to move forward carefully and cautiously.

- **Collaborative** – We will listen to what works best for the people involved in the groups and activities that we facilitate and participate in at Christ Church. Through this process we hope to discern what needs to be pruned from the old way of being church and also what needs to be preserved and nurtured from what has been introduced during lockdown. We particularly would want to hear:
 - What we miss about pre-lockdown church that has not been present in online church.
 - What we have appreciated about online church that we should continue to do.
- **Careful** – We will determine how we stay safe during the transition and beyond, including following the government and Church of England guidance on social distancing, hygiene, etc.
- **Cautious** – We will prayerfully discern the appropriate rate of change, that ensures that we don't move too quickly or too slowly, but allows us to move forward together. Cautious but not overly cautious!

I've added a fourth 'C' – Closer...

- **Closer** – Is what we are doing bringing us:
 - Closer to God;
 - Closer to one another;
 - Closer to our community.

When we emerge from lockdown, we won't be the same. Many of us will have lost loved ones. Many of us will have suffered physically, emotionally, financially, mentally or spiritually. 'If one part [of the body] suffers, every part suffers with it' (1 Corinthians 12.26). There will need to be a time for commemoration but also in the coming months it would be good to look back and say that we came through Covid-19 having learned more about what it means to be church. Hopefully we will be able to say that we consolidated what was good about our old way of being with the best of the innovation during lockdown and we are now more united, stronger, more firmly rooted and better connected. I would like us to be able to say the prayerful steps and decisions we make now made us closer to God, to one another and to our community.

In summary, this is our strategy for planning our exit from lockdown. We will work **collaboratively** to plan what we do to move forward **carefully** and **cautiously**. At each decision point we will ask the question, is what we are choosing to do helping us to move us **closer** to God, to one another and to our community?

I plan to issue regular updates to keep you informed and involved.

For now I have one decision to communicate and two questions to ask you.

A Decision

Those of you who have been following the government and the Church of England updates will be aware that in line with Government advice, the Bishops agreed in principle to a phased approach to lifting restrictions, in time and in parallel with the Government's approach, with three broad stages as infection levels improve:

1. An initial immediate phase allowing very limited access to church buildings for activities such as streaming of services or private prayer by clergy in their own parishes, so long as the necessary hygiene and social distancing precautions are taken.
2. Subsequently access for some rites and ceremonies when allowed by law, observing appropriate physical distancing and hygiene precautions.
3. Worship services with limited congregations meeting, when Government restrictions are eased to allow this.

The Acting Bishop of Chester and the archdeacons have given permission for parishes to move to stage one. We are only allowed to appoint one person for this purpose, although they may be accompanied by others from their own household. Typically, this person would be the vicar.

To do this we are required to follow rigorous requirements for cleaning after each visit and recommissioning of electrical, heating and water systems. We will need to do this at some point, but there is no advantage to doing it now, and in fact it makes unnecessary work in our context. I can do the things that the Bishops are now allowing me to do just as well in the vicarage or elsewhere. Furthermore, the guidance states that if ministers are content with leading worship from home for the time being, having made arrangements to do that, they should not feel under any obligation to switch back to church at this stage.

I have therefore decided to wait for stage two. In the meantime we will be considering the practicalities of observing appropriate physical distancing and hygiene precautions in our church building.

Questions

Some of the collaboration will be targeted to specific representative groups, alongside broader consultation through a series of open questions. Our questions for this week are:

- **What aspects of church do you miss that have been absent during lockdown?**
- **What have you appreciated about church since lockdown that we should continue to do?**

I'd love to hear from you, in whatever way works for you. I would prefer it to be in a written form, such as email, contact via the website, Facebook post, written letter, etc. but otherwise feel free to telephone.

I'd love to hear from you individually but you may also find it helpful to discuss this in your growth group or other small groups and let me know what your group thinks.

Yours in Christ

Daran