

Ministry and worship in the light of new UK government advice on COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

Advice to clergy, lay readers and parishes - St Patrick's Day, 2020

Dear Colleagues and friends in the Diocese of Connor,

As Christian people, we are a community that worships together. It is who we are and it is what we do. We will continue to be a people who worship together and in the challenging situation that we now find ourselves, I do not want us ever to lose sight of that! I am mindful of the injunction in the letter to the Hebrews - "Let us not neglect meeting together..." However, we are currently faced with the reality of a pandemic virus which is going to make us have to rethink the way that we worship, at least for a little time.

Yesterday, the UK government issued new advice to its citizens regarding the necessary precautions that we need to observe in order that we may minimise the impact of the COVID-19 virus to our communities and families. In a response to a specific question in the House of Commons about how this guidance would impact on churches and religious groups, the Health Secretary Matt Hancock confirmed that with regret the government had to include religious communities within the scope of their guidance on avoidable social gatherings.

I have consulted with the Connor archdeacons, with the bishops/ commissaries of the other dioceses in the Church of Ireland's northern province and have received feedback too from other Christian denominations. We all feel that this is the time for significant action. As a result, in conjunction with what other church leaders are also doing today, I am writing to you to with the following recommendations for parishes in Connor diocese.

- 1.** Parishes should suspend the normal services of public worship until such times as the government restrictions on public gatherings are lifted. This includes Sunday and midweek services
 - Instead, I would urge clergy and parishioners to work together to enable churches to be open as places of prayer for parishioners and the community alike. This will require measures to be put in place to enable adequate social distancing when people are using the building, good hygiene practices and regular cleansing of the building and surfaces.
- 2.** Creative ways should be considered in order to assist parishioners continue in worship
 - If your church has a website, or Facebook page, consider providing short acts of worship, Bible teaching, etc online. You don't need to be a master of technology to do this. It is remarkably easy to stream a service on your church's Facebook page using no more complicated equipment than a smartphone!
 - Encourage parishioners to discover the resource of their prayer books in a new way or point them to the online resources available on the Church of Ireland website, or other online resources that you use.

- Do remember that not every parishioner will have access online or the skills to use online resources. Consider producing or distributing prayer resources to encourage people in daily prayer.
- 3.** Other parish meetings and organisations should also be suspended with immediate effect.
- This advice now includes the Easter General Vestry meeting. Although it might be possible to organise a meeting observing the appropriate precautions, the new government guidance would mean that a section of the church community would be disenfranchised. At this point it seems unlikely that we will be able to properly convene EGV meetings within the time limits set by the constitution, but it seems unlikely that the Charity Commission will be unsympathetic in the current situation and current office holders and trustees should continue in post until such time as it is feasible to hold a General Vestry meeting. The Assessor of the General Synod is being consulted on the detail of this and further information will be given when it is available.
 - Select Vestry meetings should also be suspended until further notice. Essential business should be conducted by email circulation or other electronic means.
- 4.** Funerals will need to be smaller gatherings than normal. This will obviously need to be handled sensitively and in close co-operation with the funeral director, but the principles should be
- A brief, dignified service conducted with due regard for the needs of the family, but also for the guidelines on public gatherings.
 - Try to encourage immediate family only to attend - offer a service of thanksgiving for the wider community at a later date when restrictions are lifted;
 - It may help if times and details of funeral services are not published in funeral notices - meaning that casual attendance of additional mourners is made less likely;
 - Handshaking and other physical contact with and amongst mourners should be avoided
 - Catering after funerals should not be offered in church halls at this time.
- 5.** Weddings - It may be possible to proceed with a marriage service in church, again providing it complies with the recommendations of the health authorities. This may require significant changes to a couple's plans, and it may be that they will prefer to rearrange a new date. Anecdotal evidence over the last day or two would indicate that reception venues may be raising this issue with couples and in some cases weddings have been postponed.
- 6.** Confirmation Services All confirmation services in the diocese of Connor have now been postponed.
- 7.** Home Communion & Pastoral visiting All Home Communion and routine pastoral visiting should cease from 17th March 2020 until further notice. Instead Clergy and/or Pastoral Visitors should contact those needing pastoral care in parishes by telephoning them. The hospital chaplains are no longer permitted to carry out hospital visits unless expressly invited to do so by hospital staff. Clergy who are asked to visit parishioners in hospital or residential care should only do so if permitted by

the hospital/residential facility and with the consent of the individual's family. Hygiene and physical distancing measures must be observed.

8. Support for the Self-isolated. Develop a plan for your parish to provide help and support for those who will need to self-isolate in the days and weeks ahead. As I suggested last week, parishes could be a hub for co-ordinating practical care such as collecting groceries or other essential supplies for those who do not have family able to assist them, etc. Contact local food banks to see if they need additional support or help. Encourage parishioners to think about the people who normally sit beside them in church and their neighbours. Whilst calling to visit people in their homes is not recommended, if everyone reaches out with telephone calls to a few people it will help to reduce loneliness in these challenging times and help make sure that help can be provided where it is needed.
9. Diocesan Events
 - The Connor Diocesan Synod which was scheduled for 25 June 2020 will now be postponed. A date for the meeting will be circulated in due course.
 - Consecration of Bishop of Connor - The Archbishop-elect has confirmed that the consecration service will take place on the feast of St Philip & St James - 1 May 2020. However, this will now essentially be a private service with a very limited congregation. It is intended that the installation/enthronement services (which will be held once the current restrictions have been lifted) will provide an opportunity for us to gather for a diocesan celebration.
10. Clergy, Lay Readers and Volunteers - The health and well-being of those in leadership in the parish, together with volunteers is of key importance, both for their own protection and for the good of those they serve. Those with underlying health conditions, and those over 70 years of age should adhere to government guidance concerning self-isolation, as of course, should those who develop symptoms of the virus. Clergy are asked to communicate and work with neighbouring clergy/ rural deans to co-ordinate continuing pastoral care in parishes across the diocese. A generosity of spirit and willingness to help each other out will ensure that we are able to support one another through this time.
11. Diocesan Office - Arrangements for the operation of the Diocesan Office will be finalised in the next few days and will be notified to you shortly.

As Christian people in the parishes of Connor diocese, with our neighbours, we face real challenges at the moment. Please remember that whilst so much that is familiar is changing around us at the moment, God's love for us is constant and Christ is still Lord. In these times of challenge we turn to Him afresh, in different patterns perhaps, but if we draw deeply on the resources of the Holy Spirit we will be able to not only come through this challenge intact, but stronger in our relationship with Jesus Christ and with one another.

Please know that you are in my prayers - and remember me in yours!

With love in Him,

George

George Davison
Bishop-designate