

Statement from the Church of Ireland Bishops in Northern Ireland in relation to Public Worship - Friday 22 January 2021

As you will be aware, yesterday afternoon the Northern Ireland Executive took the unanimous decision to extend the current Covid-19 restrictions until Friday 5th March 2021. This decision was based on the strong recommendation of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor, as a result of the continued extremely high level of transmission of the Covid-19 virus throughout the community (which over these last four weeks had not reduced to the level that had been hoped for), along with the increasing numbers in hospital and intensive care.

In the light of this decision, and on the basis of the clear and unequivocal public health advice that people should continue to *stay at home*, we have decided that all in person Sunday gatherings for worship, along with all other in person church gatherings, should remain suspended in all Church of Ireland parishes in Northern Ireland until Friday 5th March 2021 - with the exception of weddings, funerals, arrangements for recording and/or live-streaming, drive-in services and private prayer (as permitted by regulations). This same step is also being taken today by the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Roman Catholic Church.

While we acknowledge that there is both cost and disappointment in this for many, we see this decision as part of our response to the command of Jesus to love our neighbours. We continue to encourage as many people as possible to *stay at home* for the sake of health, life and the Common Good.

Ultimately, as followers of Jesus, we are people of hope. As we journey through these dark and difficult days, we live in that hope, looking to the light that we find in Jesus.

We very much look forward to that time when we will be able, once again, to meet together for worship. Lent will begin this year on 17th February, Ash Wednesday, which will be during this new period of extended restrictions. Lent is a penitential season when we journey in heart and mind with Christ in his suffering. As we contemplate the cross, may our hearts and minds be open to the healing and transforming power of God's presence with us. In the resurrection light of Easter may we then find new hope not just for our own lives but also for the world around us.

+John Armagh
+Andrew Derry and Raphoe
+David Down and Dromore
+George Connor