

Dear Friends,

As the Archbishop of Canterbury makes clear [in this article](#), the worship of God is not an optional extra. It is a necessity. The worrying news of recent days may be tempting some churches to cut back on their programme of worship for Christmas. But what our communities need more than anything else this anxious Christmas is joyful and confident proclamation of the message of the Incarnation. 'Do not be afraid,' the angel declares to the shepherds. For in Jesus God has come to be with us and our salvation is assured.

Of course we must ensure that our worship is as safe as possible. But the Archbishop points out that we are quite capable of doing that which is why there have been so few transmissions of the virus on places of worship. So this Christmas, speak words of hope and act safely.

Attendance Data

To start with some good news, this year's Church of England attendance data has a chart which compares 2020 Regular Weekly Attendance with that of 2019 and so demonstrates how well Dioceses have bounced back after lockdown. Blackburn was at the top of the table both for adults and children which is remarkable testimony to the hard work and dedication of our clergy and lay leaders. We knew that the way so many of you are leading your parishes through the pandemic is outstanding, but it is good to have statistical proof of that.

Face Masks and Singing in Church

Face mask wearing in church is now compulsory by law and failing to comply is an offence. Those leading or contributing to a service can remove their masks to be better heard and to assist those who lip read. For the congregation, the only exception is when singing in church.

However, given that Covid-19 is spread by aerosol droplets, the advice of the Task Group is that members of congregations be requested to continue to wear face masks even when singing.

Local decision making may conclude that it is safe for a choir to remain unmasked as long as other precautions are put in place. There is very good advice about this on the RSCM website [here](#).

Church of England communication about vaccinations

Bishop Julian has issued a [video message](#) to the people of Lancashire emphasising the importance of getting protected as the Omicron variant continues to cause concern. He joins the Archbishops and other Bishops across the country in doing so at this time.

In the video, which he hopes can be shared with church congregations, Bishop Julian says: *"I support this national call, as do the Bishop's Leadership Team. Even the most optimistic modelling points once again to a winter that will see serious consequences from this virus. I encourage you to take up the offer of a booster vaccine or, if you haven't had a vaccination yet, to go and get it without delay. Please do stay safe this Christmas and book your vaccine as soon as you can."*

Testing

Whilst it is not compulsory, please do consider asking people to take a lateral flow test before big services and events. It would be wise to order test kits as early as possible.

Ventilation

We know that 'the weather outside is frightful,' but well ventilated buildings make a massive difference to safety, in church and at home. Advise people to wrap up warm for Christmas and keep the air inside moving.

Advice for Clergy over Christmas

Plan B. It could well be that you test positive or are asked to self-isolate in the next few days so it would be worth having in your back pocket a contingency plan in case you are suddenly unavailable. The local partnerships that we set up at the start of the pandemic may help in this regard.

Post-Christmas Breaks. It is hard work ministering against a backdrop such as this. If you have not yet planned a post-Christmas break, please do try and get something in the diary. If you are not sure where to go, [Whalley Abbey](#) is a lovely place for a few days of rest and relaxation.

Christmas messages from all our Bishops

The annual Christmas messages from Bishop Julian, Bishop Philip and Bishop Jill are out now and can be watched and shared online via our YouTube channel. There are also text versions available on the website; or to download as pdfs or Word documents. The latter are particularly useful if you are parish with people who are not online and you want to pass on the messages in printed form. You will find everything you need to engage with all the messages, [available here on the news section](#) of the Diocesan website.

Online multilingual Christmas service for the whole Diocese

Our usual monthly Diocesan multilingual online service will be a celebration of Christmas. It will be led by The Revd Sarah Gill; livestreamed from 3pm on Sunday, December 19, from All Saints Higher Walton [via the Diocesan YouTube channel](#) and will be held in accordance with the Covid guidance at the time. If you can't watch it live, the service will remain after the live broadcast on the channel as a recording. [Find out more about it here.](#)

And don't forget our Advent and Christmas Resources page on the Diocesan website with videos, information, helpful materials for all ages and much more [here](#).

Over the Christmas Break...

The Coronavirus Task Group will be keeping a close eye on developments and it seems more than possible that extra measures will be introduced from St Stephen's Day. We will send out briefings as necessary to keep you apprised.

Coronavirus Email Address

If you have questions or problems and can't find answers on the [advice compendium](#) please email: coronavirus@blackburn.anglican.org.

A prayer

Father,

We thank you for your loving care and providence, although we are unworthy.

We thank you for sending your dear Son Jesus to live among us, to share in our lot and to die for all that all might live.

We ask you to look with mercy on all people throughout the world who are fearful of the threats of pestilence, war and famine in these uncertain times.

Give us the courage to overcome fear trusting in your loving plan for all people which gives us hope for the future even in the face of present adversity.

Watch over us and protect us from all harm.

We ask this in the name of Your Son our Lord Jesus Christ,
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever.

Amen.

Regards,

Coronavirus Task Group