

Dear Friends,

The roller coaster continues on its seemingly endless journey. One day we are down in a dip as we hear about new variants and emergency testing regimes, some very close to our own Diocese. Next we are on a high as we hear about the vaccine rollout. Then it's back down as we mourn the loss of the inspirational Captain Tom to the virus. Then up again as we start to imagine a very different sort of lifestyle in the Summer. Trying to stay balanced is next to impossible! In this week's briefing we conclude with a short reflection from Fr Nicholas Heale who reminds us that the only source of lasting stability and peace is the 'I am' of Jesus Christ.

Re-opening churches for face-to-face public worship

The majority of our churches have now closed for public worship, and it is good that those who have are keeping that decision under constant review. This is a decision that needs to be made locally and the following set of questions have been devised by the medical experts on the task group (who are also parish priests) to help churches in making that decision.

If you are struggling with this issue in your parish, please do contact an Area Dean, a Bishop or an Archdeacon or email the Coronavirus email address. Talking it through with someone else can often be very helpful.

There is no greater privilege than being able to gather in person to worship as the body of Christ, so it is important that we prayerfully consider when and how we return to face-to-face public worship.

The context of each church, the communities they serve and their experience of COVID will be different. It is important to take time to reflect on this as the parish starts to consider returning to public worship. This complex decision sits with the incumbent, churchwardens, and PCC.

To help we have come up with four questions that you, and those in leadership in your church, might find helpful in guiding your deliberations. There are no definitive answers, and answers may change as circumstances change.

Recognising the reality that COVID-19 in its various forms will be present in our communities for the foreseeable future, re-opening must continue to follow all government and national church guidance around the safe conduct of face-to face worship. This will include, but is not limited to: social distancing, the use of hand sanitisers, collecting names of attendees, the wearing of face coverings and the current restrictions around singing.

Be honest and realistic. For some churches it will be possible to make plans and even set a date in the near future, for others there may need to be a period of waiting and watching to see how events unfold locally, across Lancashire and nationally.

When do we think we could safely look to return to public worship in church?

- What is the current trend in cases in my area and how does it compare with the national figures? BBC Radio Lancashire publishes the rates across Lancashire daily Monday to Friday via Facebook. In addition, monitor the advice being given by the Directors for Public Health across the Diocese.
- What is the mood within the congregation about re-opening the church?
- Do we have the resources to re-open and what would be the implications of re-opening be on those involved such as churchwardens, sides people etc?

How do we re-open?

- Consider if it is appropriate to return to the normal pattern of services, or is there an argument to provide only some services or different services at other times in the week?
- Think about how the building will be kept COVID secure, recognising the risks not just of the service itself but before and after it, as well as the need to travel to and from the church building. Review and revise all your risk assessments.
- Will you continue to run both online as well as face to face services and if so, what is realistic and sustainable?
- How will you continue to minister to those who are not yet ready to return?

How and when will we review our decisions and plans?

Whatever decision you make, build in regular reviews that consider:

- Changes in cases locally.
- Advice being given by Directors of Public Health.
- How well the COVID-19 restrictions are being observed by the congregation.
- On-going concerns of the congregation and wider community.

How will we communicate our plans?

- How will you help people to understand why you have deemed it safe to return to in-person worship or not?
- Ensure there are clear notices on church notice boards and doors around what is happening in your church.
- Update your church website, Facebook page and any other social media platforms.
- Ensure the website 'a church near you' (ACNY) has all the necessary up to date information uploaded.

Copyright and technology

We have distributed information about copyright in relation to using technology (livestreaming etc) in previous Task Group briefings, but we thought it was worth a reminder as the pandemic continues.

[In this section on our website](#) there is relevant information including an onward link to The Church of England national website where you find a 'Beginner's guide' page. Recent additions to the 'Beginner's guide' include information about copyright in relation to services held on Zoom.

The Weekly Message

Archdeacon Mark is this week's contributor for the Weekly Message. His short talk is on the theme 'Contentment' and can be viewed [here on the Diocesan YouTube Channel](#).

Worship this Sunday

This week's Sunday Service is the next of our monthly Multi-lingual services led by the Revd Sarah Gill, Vicar of St James and St Stephen's Blackburn. The theme is healing and the preacher is Archdeacon Mark Ireland. It will be available [here on the Diocesan YouTube channel](#).

Prayer for the Nation

The recent milestone of 100,000 Covid-related deaths is a stark reminder to us of the many loved ones lost across our nation in the almost 12 months since the pandemic took hold; including, just this week, the wonderful and inspiring Captain Sir Tom Moore.

The Archbishops' 'Prayer for the Nation' is a response to those 100,000 deaths. The initiative began on Monday and continues throughout February.

We are invited by the Archbishops to take time to pray each day, particularly at 6pm. [Visit this page on our website](#) for information and onward links to wider resources suitable for all ages to help you take part.

A Reflection from Fr Nicholas Heale

Fr Nicholas is the Vicar of St Jude's, St Michael's and Holy Trinity Blackburn serving an area that is one of the worst in the country in terms of the impact of the pandemic. Here he reflects on two of the ways he is sustaining priestly ministry in these challenging times:

"I made a list of what I *have* been able to do, instead of dwelling on everything which I *haven't* done (or been *able* to do) - and found that there was far more on it than I had allowed myself to imagine. A lot of it has been done *well*, which was a bonus.

I try to think less about 'when this is all finished', let alone what we will 'need' to do when that time comes. As this thing extends ever-longer, I am adjusting my horizon to what I can do *now* (which sometimes isn't much), instead of 'the future' which is increasingly unclear.

I notice that a lot of my 'thought' about all this is really *feeling* - and it is a feeling of generalized *anxiety*. So I try to factor into these precepts a spirit of gentleness and kindness towards myself and other people.

I try to avoid language of *compulsion* ('I *must* do x'; 'I *have* to do y'; 'what we *need* to do is z') - to *open up possibility* instead of imposing *obligation*: '*it would be good to do as much of this as I can*'. In practice this is not really about what I do, but how I *think* about it, and in the face of this shared trauma it helps me nurture hopefulness.

I try to be *present*. I remember St Paul who found God in *weakness*, and Jesus who says that I *Am*."

Coronavirus Email Address

If you have questions or problems please email: coronavirus@blackburn.anglican.org. It is important that clergy who are self-isolating send us a note to this address.

Gracious God,
as we remember before you the thousands
who have died,
surround us and all who mourn with your
strong compassion.

Be gentle with us in our grief,
protect us from despair,
and give us grace to persevere
and face the future with hope
in Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

Amen.

Yours,
The Coronavirus Task Group