

Dear Friends,

First of all allow me to wish you a Happy New Year. I hope that you were able to find safe ways to celebrate with family over the festive period and to engage in meaningful and creative acts of worship. I hope this year will be one where you encounter God's presence and blessings in manifold and surprising ways.

We had of course all hoped that the New Year would bring a new start to our society. However we now find ourselves back in a place of being required by law to stay at home as much as possible for at least the next six weeks as the mass vaccination programme is rolled out.

I want to take this opportunity to update you on the current guidance from the national Methodist Church and to inform you of a decision I have taken as Superintendent Minister of the Circuit, with the full support of the Circuit Minister's Team.

The national Methodist Church website has this update:

"Following the Prime Minister's statement on 4 January 2021, a new National Lockdown has been announced in England. This now supercedes all other previous government guidance, including the Tier system. This came into effect from midnight on 4 January 2021.

A number of the restrictions outlined in the new government guidance affect Methodist Church property. Unlike previous lockdown decisions, the government has decided that churches can remain open, along with community buildings for certain activities.

Despite this government decision, it should be borne in mind that the opening of our church buildings is not mandatory, and it remains the responsibility of each Church Council to make this significant decision – which should not be taken lightly. It should be based upon thorough risk assessments and planning to ensure that it is safe to do so. Every venue should fully meet the health and safety requirements for a COVID-19 secure environment in opening and operation, including the impact on those opening a building and those attending if they fall into a vulnerable group.

The Connexional team have provided a variety of information on alternative ways to worship, fellowship and explore mission. During this difficult time, we encourage you to explore these as alternatives to opening a building and the increased risks this may bring."

Having consulted yesterday afternoon with my fellow Superintendent Ministers around the District and with our Chair of District, I have this morning spent an hour and a half

in careful, thoughtful, prayerful conversation with my Circuit colleagues and we have come to a common mind.

Whilst the updated Church guidance recognises that it is the responsibility of each church council to decide whether to open or close church buildings, (and church councils must express that oversight in relation to the use of it's building by external groups according to the guidelines for the safe use of places of worship), it is both the privilege and responsibility of the Superintendent Minister to hold oversight of all arrangements for services of worship in each local church.

Given the seriousness of our current situation and the increased risk to everyone's health from the new variant of Covid, the Ministry Team have taken the decision to cease all services of worship in all our church buildings (except for funerals) until the end of January. This is not a decision we have come to easily or lightly and I know it will cause some upset in some places but we firmly believe it is the right course of action for the short-term to help protect lives and to support the work of the NHS.

We are committed to reviewing this decision in the week beginning the 25th Jan and will at that point reflect again upon both Government and Church guidance. Ultimately, I am not prepared to put the health and well-being of colleagues, local preachers, church stewards as well as members of our congregations, many of whom fall into the most vulnerable categories, at risk for the sake of physical, communal worship for a few short weeks when there are other ways that most people are able to engage in some form of worship from the safety of their own home. Neither do I think I actually have the necessary resources in terms of available preachers willing to facilitate such worship.

If steward's teams have concerns about this decision I would ask that they put their concerns in writing to me so that thoughts can be taken into account when we review this decision at the end of the month.

Allow me now to encourage you that this decision does not mean that the work of God through the churches of our Circuit is put on hold. Several our churches are already well-versed in using Zoom, FaceBook or YouTube to share in worship. Zoom also provides the opportunity for people without internet signal or appropriate equipment to use their telephone to participate audibly in services held on that platform. Your local church Minister will be able to give guidance as to how services will take place and where they can be accessed. It does of course also provide a brief opportunity to share in worship with folk from other parts of the Circuit or even Connexion. Details of how to participate in various forms of worship can be found on both the Circuit website (www.wandamethodists.org.uk) and the Connexional website (www.methodist.org.uk) We shall also be endeavouring to continue sending out service sheets where appropriate to ensure that as many people as possible can engage with resources for worship.

As time, effort and energy are released from making arrangements for physical services I wish to encourage you to consider how you and your church can develop your pastoral care for one another and you service and evangelism to your local communities. Can you spare some time to check up on neighbours or friends to see if they need any assistance? Can you volunteer to help with charitable services such as

foodbanks or stewarding at vaccination clinics? Can you arrange informal times of pastoral care, support, prayer, or Bible study virtually or by telephone with those who might appreciate the opportunity? Please be creative in your planning but ensure that safety and well-being are held paramount in your minds.

Some words from Psalm 46 to encourage us over the coming weeks: "God is our refuge and strength, and ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging...The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

With every blessing,

Rev Tim