

17 March 2020

To Ministers of Word and Sacraments and CRCWs

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We are writing to you during this outbreak of coronavirus (Covid 19) to assure you of our prayers as you minister to those in our churches and communities who will be feeling anxious about the future and concerned for the health of friends and neighbours, as well as themselves. We too would value your prayers as we consider the effects of this virus on the work of the Assembly office.

As you know the Government has now strongly discouraged public gatherings and will shortly issue advice for over 70 year-olds and those who may be particularly vulnerable. Many of our churches have already suspended all acts of worship, physical meetings, and other church activities, probably for some weeks, or even months. While this is profoundly sad, we think it is a proper response to the Government's guidance, and it is a policy that we strongly encourage every church to consider. We shall of course update you as guidance changes.

Some of our people may be involved in community support and care, in formal and informal ways. Naturally we shall want to be careful, for others' well-being and also our own. If you undertake home visits for any purpose, you are advised to take precautions, or to consider using alternative ways of contact. If your church buildings continue to be used for any activities e.g. a food bank, you will be especially careful about hygiene.

However, as we cease meeting physically for worship, this may prove most difficult for the group such measures are designed to protect, the elderly. Some steps can be taken to ensure that congregants do not feel isolated and they have access to helpful information and support.

1. Consider some kind of telephone cascade system to enable prayer requests, pastoral news and the need for practical help to be passed on. This should be the most inclusive way of communicating as it accommodates those who are not able and confident in using a computer.
2. Pay attention to vulnerable groups, particularly people over 70, pregnant women, families affected by domestic abuse, those with long-term health conditions, mental disorders or disabilities and people who rely on others' assistance for daily support. Your church's safeguarding coordinator or the synod safeguarding officer may have helpful advice to offer about these situations.

3. Take advice about coronavirus from NHS Guidelines and share them with your Church. The NHS link is here: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>
4. Andy Braunston is working to extend Daily Devotions from the URC to include a short Sunday service framework, starting this Sunday 22 March. The sign up for those who do not yet receive them can be found on the URC website: devotions.urc.org.uk
5. Many of you are either already streaming services or planning to begin. If you are just starting, remember to check the copyright issues first.
6. The Communications Team will soon feature a page on the URC website showing where anyone can join in with online worship, from live broadcasts to recorded sermons. If your church can help with this, please tell Andy Jackson: andy.jackson@urc.org.uk . There will also be guidance for those who want to start using Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and other social media.
7. FaceTime/Skype may enable some to gather in small Bible study or fellowship groups.
8. You may have other ideas that will help to sustain our people and their church life through difficult weeks ahead. If so, we shall be glad to hear from you.
9. Let us not forget the wider community in our concern for congregants. Neighbours can offer shopping or a friendly chat on the phone, without putting their own health at risk from those who are self-isolating.
10. Following the cancellation of this week's Mission Council and all of the Spring Synod meetings, we will find ways of letting you know how work can be carried forward. A decision about General Assembly will be made over the course of the next few weeks.

Finally, a prayer:

Lord Jesus,

In the midst of a storm,
You said, 'Peace be still.'

Bid our anxious fears subside,
Sustain your church in faith, hope and love,
Bring our nation through this tumult,

Grant wisdom to those with heavy responsibilities,
And healing and hope to those who are infected.

Amen.

Yours sincerely,



John Proctor,
General Secretary

with Jane Baird, Francis Brienen, Richard Church
Deputy General Secretaries