

Spring and early Summer this year were times of trauma, loss and stress - particularly for those in the NHS and Care sector. At the same time the national lockdown did create some sense of unity and purpose, as illustrated by rainbows in windows and the “Clap for Carers” on a Thursday night. By contrast it seems that the UK is now increasingly divided along many different lines. The three-tier system which was supposed to simplify restrictions seems to have failed in that intent. This uncertainty and confusion is set against a backdrop where every measure of national health and wellbeing is going in the wrong direction, with the worst effects being felt disproportionately by those who were already suffering disadvantage.

The Church is not immune to this rising tide of division, anxiety, anger and uncertainty. Compared to earlier this year, churches now have the freedom to open premises for worship providing requirements can be met. But this freedom brings the challenge of agreeing between ourselves on what is a responsible course of action in the local context. It also brings a heavy weight of responsibility for Managing Trustees and ministers in oversight. It can be very tempting in these circumstances to look for those in senior leadership in the church to “tell us what to do”.

At the time of writing, the geography of the District is either in Tier 1 (Medium) or Tier 2 (High). Despite the fact that even in Tier 3 places of worship are allowed to stay open, we cannot ignore the fact that we are at a critical point in a public health crisis. Having discussed the situation with the Superintendent ministers we've agreed it would be helpful for me, as District Chair, to make the following observations:

- Gathering physically at this time, even as a “Covid-19 secure venue”, does carry some risk of the virus being transmitted with consequences not only for those of us who attend but also those with whom we network. Therefore it's essential that Managing Trustees have a clear idea of why that risk is worth taking if the church is to be open. What is being gained through meeting physically that could not be achieved through other means? What are the critical needs that are being met through the church being open? Please understand that this is not a directive to close your church. But it's a reminder that we need to be clear about the reasons for our decisions. It's not sufficient reason to be open just because you can, or because other local churches are open.
- Churches that made a decision to open again are not duty-bound to stick to that decision. A risk assessment is a dynamic thing in the context of a pandemic. If you do decide to close again then the work you have already done will not be wasted as it should be much easier to open a second time around. I would suggest this is not a good time to be contemplating any further re-opening beyond what has already happened, without very good reason.
- If the Managing Trustees do decide to keep church premises open then it is even more important that everyone adheres to the measures identified in the risk assessment, both during worship and immediately after it. If a local congregation proves resistant to these measures then that church should not be open.
- Risk assessment is about people as well as buildings. A Circuit should not allow the opening of churches to pressurise anyone into making decisions that are prejudicial to their own health and well-being. Ministers in oversight - and particularly Superintendent Ministers - will play a crucial role in ensuring that these pressures do not build up. Even when a Circuit Plan is only short-term or subject to change, it is still the Superintendent minister who should oversee worship arrangements in the Circuit. Local churches should not independently invite people to attend in order to lead worship. In many Circuits it's highly likely that at the moment, there will be Sundays when no-one is available to lead worship in person in every church that has chosen to open.
- You do not have to go far to find people in our society who claim the freedom to choose what they do independent of Government advice, claiming they are willing to take the risk upon themselves. This is a grave error. The choices we make inevitably affect other people. Followers of Jesus will always be asking what it means to love our neighbours as ourselves.

As District Chair I am immensely proud of the way that Methodists in Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury are responding faithfully, persistently, courageously and creatively to this horrible time in the life not only of our nation but of our world. This is a time when even the smallest acts of love and kindness can make a great deal of difference. Thank you for all you are doing.

As the days get shorter and the darkness grows I am holding on to a paraphrase of a verse from John Chapter 1 which remains a cornerstone of my Christian faith: *The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not, does not and will never overcome it.*

With every blessing

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