

***To all clergy and lay ministers (including PTO)
cc Churchwardens***

Date: 4th March 2021
Our ref: MJS/rhw-bp9342

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I hope this season of Lent is bringing you encouragement and strength as we continue to face the exhausting challenges of lockdown, and as the one-year anniversary of the first lockdown approaches. This moment brings with it its own emotions and lament but as Christians, we remain focussed on the hope of Easter and the promise of God's new life.

I write with a particularly heavy heart following the latest letter from the City Mayor of Leicester. This letter has asked for an extension to the voluntary closure of places of worship in Leicester in view of the stubbornly high infection rates in the city and in parts of the county. Although the letter suggests that this is "for a few more weeks" and it does not specifically refer to Easter, it would appear that the assumption is that our celebration of Easter might once again be affected. This is hugely disappointing and particularly hard to bear given all we have been through over the past year.

I am clear however, that the situation varies greatly across the city and county so the final decision on public worship rests with each Incumbent and PCC and consideration of local infection rates. Some of you, I know, have already been planning in-person services and events for Holy Week and Easter. If you decide to continue with these, I can only ask that you re-double your efforts to ensure that this is done safely and with due regard to public health advice. You may want to consider meeting outdoors, although under the current regulations congregational singing is still not allowed either indoors or outdoors. Alternatively, if your decision is to cancel any planned in-person activities, please do everything possible to advertise your online events well and make them accessible to visitors who want to celebrate Easter with their local church community. I understand that the Cathedral is keeping its plans flexible to allow for either in-person or livestreamed worship – it is unlikely they will have in-person services before Easter Day at the earliest, with a final decision being taken nearer the time.

I am very aware that this is an impossibly difficult decision, particularly for those who live in areas where the infection rate is still rising or is well above the national average. Sadly, it is once again the economically poorer areas which are most affected and therefore I need to ask that in making your decision, you think not only about what is right for your own

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community but also about your place in the wider diocesan community and our common life together. I am also very aware that other faith communities have had their main festivals severely disrupted in recent months and therefore we need to act with sensitivity and care. There are genuine concerns about community relations at this time and every one of us carries a responsibility to work for the good of all in our city and county. Having said all that (and as I have said before) whatever your final decision, I will support you providing you have followed a good process in reaching that decision and in implementing it safely.

Can I also ask you to continue to hold in your prayers those in positions of authority in our city and county? Strenuous efforts are being made to reduce the rates of infection and to encourage everyone to be vaccinated, yet it remains the case that we face the possibility of a further local lockdown even as the rest of the country emerges from the restrictions. I am personally in touch with leaders in the Local Authorities as well as the Health Service and I have assured them of the support of all our churches in tackling this situation. Issues of poverty, deprivation and trust seem to be increasingly relevant in rates of infection and of vaccine uptake and demand our attention. If you have thoughts on what more can be done, I would be only too pleased to hear from you.

On a more positive note, the government's timetable for the lifting of restrictions does now suggest that summer holidays may be possible. We are therefore actively looking at how we might provide some ready-made online resource for churches to use in the summer period so that you can take a break without having to plan all your services in advance or find cover. We hope to have more details on this quite soon. In the meantime, please continue to access the [wellbeing resources on the website](#) and feel free to contact myself or the Archdeacons if you need any support.

This comes with my continued thanks for your faithful ministry at this time of great challenge. May you know God's strengthening and support each day.



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