



## A Pastoral Letter from the Bishop of St Asaph to all in ministry

Dear Friends,

I am always amazed by the ability of scripture to speak into our current realities. This morning, at Morning Prayer, the psalms included this verse:

“My friends and my companions stand apart from my affliction,  
My neighbours stand afar off.”

You see – social distancing has biblical sanction!

I also came across a tweet by the Bishop of Norwich last night, which said this:

We continue to be the Church, just in a different way.  
We continue to be a people of hope.  
We continue to be a people of prayer.  
We continue to be a people of kindness.  
We continue to be a people of loving service.  
Because we are the Church of God.

It expressed exactly my sentiments, and the view in which I want to encourage you at this present time. These unprecedented days, when we all feel that we are living through a plague situation, can be unsettling. However, it is precisely when God calls the Church to be most prominent in its witness, proclaiming his care and love for all people, and the invitation to place our trust and confidence in him.

At this time, therefore, I have a number of hopes for the way in which we will live out our priestly and diaconal vocations at this time. I want to address our colleagues in lay ministry as well, both those in authorised ministries, and those serving our common life through the specialisms and expertise of the Diocesan Office Team.

## **Caring for ourselves**

First, we need to take care of ourselves and our nearest and dearest. We can be no use to God if we do not ensure that we maintain the wisest and best ways of sustaining our energy, health and mental well-being, and to care for our families so that home may be a secure source of support and a strong foundation from which we may act in ministry. I cannot reiterate too strongly how important it is to heed government advice on such things as social distancing and self-isolation where and when these become important, especially if we fall under the heading of one of the risk factors identified by government advice.

Clergy should report their status to the relevant archdeacon and Mission Area Leader should it change, and lay ministers to their team leader or Mission Area Leader, if only for us to be able to hold you in prayer, and offer you support should you need it.

Be assured of my prayers and support for you, as you go about ministry. For although our public worship may have halted, the Church is more open for business than ever, and ministry may enter a different mode, but is even more precious at a time like this.

## **Caring for each another**

It is important that we keep up networks of support with each other. Gatherings for prayer may no longer be appropriate, but that does not prevent the frequent offering of encouragement and the sharing of prayer needs by emails, social media, What's App groups and the like. I know that I personally need your prayers - for wisdom, stamina, and right judgement; and I hope that we'll all be offering that sort of ministry to one another in our shared ministry teams. Who is taking responsibility for producing a prayer rota or prayer chain in your team?

There may also be small ministries that we can offer one another at a time like this. Small acts of love, generosity and support will count for a lot.

## **Caring for our congregations and communities**

I have been heartened by the amazing initiatives that I have been hearing about in some Mission Areas, where teams are being co-ordinated to ensure that the potentially vulnerable are being looked after. The suspension of public worship does not mean the suspension of ministry. If exhibiting symptoms or

vulnerability, we must protect ourselves, but that does not mean all interaction between people is being banned. Brief intentional visiting or a small gathering for a specific purpose, making pastoral telephone calls, and visiting by electronic means can come to the fore.

## **Our Churches and our Worship**

Our Churches as places of refuge, sanctuary and prayer are also more important now than ever. While we should be careful to observe best practice about interaction which minimises the risk of infection, I hope that every place of worship in the diocese is open to the public for private prayer at present. Locked doors are simply not sufficient as a witness to the love of God.

I should be grateful if ministers would ensure that not only are the Churches open for prayer, but that there is a specific and obvious zone near the entrance which presents a point of interaction with people seeking help in the current circumstances. It may take the form of a table signposted and carrying resources for prayer and reflection; there may be a place for lodging prayer requests – a prayer tree, or prayer box. There may be a contact list.

At the very least, please communicate with your congregations and faithful that prayer and worship in their own discipleship should not cease, but be redoubled. And please provide them with resources, or point them in the right direction. A form for an Act of Spiritual Communion would be very helpful, given that the Eucharist itself may be inaccessible, and there are many rich resources available, with some of them posted towards the bottom of our dedicated page on the diocesan website: <https://dioceseofstasaph.org.uk/coronavirus/>

I am personally exploring whether there might be the possibility of offering podcasts of worship from Esgobty chapel through the Easter season, to which our people might be invited to participate – as bishop inviting the teulu Asaph to join me virtually in my own chapel on a Sunday morning for a short act of devotion, reflection and prayer. I should be grateful for any volunteers to assist with this. I am conscious that I need to provide a safe environment, and I will have to think how it might work, but it would be better if there were more than one voice, and one participant seeking to provide this service. Please send me an email if you have any good ideas, or can offer some appropriate level of participation. If I'm able to sort something out, I will let you know.

In all of this, above all else, be bold and courageous. If God is on our side, who can be against us. “Be joyful, keep the faith and your creed, and do the little things.”

With my love, and concern; and with gratitude for our partnership in the Gospel.

+Gregory