26 March 2020

Dear Friends and Colleagues

Over the past ten days, we have had to offer advice never seen before by the people called Methodists. Some has been well received, some helpfully questioned by individuals but, working together, all has been offered in good faith and with a desire to preserve life in the coming weeks. We are grateful to the Media Team who have been working tirelessly to get the message out, all the time remembering Our Calling to respond to the gospel of God’s love in Christ.

The most up to date advice can be found at https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/coronavirus/official-guidance/ Some advice has led to people asking for clarification. You will find this in the FAQ’s on the website.

A few things we want to be absolutely sure you have heard from us;

In an attempt to protect people from the Coronavirus we have asked people not to travel to churches to pre-record or live stream worship or for any other reason except an emergency. You can of course live stream from your home.

In order to prevent an overload of resources and to keep the quality of the Connexional offer at its highest level we are working in collaboration with

- **Wesley's Chapel London** – who will livestream from the chapel (the Minister lives on the premises)

- **Swan Bank Methodist Church** in Burslem, this worship will be studio based – with strict distancing rules being followed

- **Revd Andy Fishburne broadcasting** “At home” from the Isle of Man

- **Methodist Central Hall, Westminster** from a virtual studio – with the worship facilitated by the team from their homes

All the links can be found at: https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/seasons-and-themes/worship-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/

We hope by promoting these we offer some breadth from our tradition whilst reducing the need for other people to take risks. We recognise the desire to lead worship for your local communities – but equally we urge you to minimise risk, to consider your workload, and to think about your midweek offer and evening offers.
Worship at Home

We will continue to provide the Worship at Home sheets. We had some negative comments about why we were not printing song words. We did this to avoid breaking copyright law. We have now included songs that are permitted under the CCLI scheme and ask you to add your CCLI number to the bottom of the sheet before you print it.

Holy Week and Easter

A number of years ago the Methodist Conference made a decision that Online Holy Communion was not permissible. We are planning a series of materials that might be used for worship during Holy Week and to allow us to celebrate Easter in new and creative ways during this time of enforced exile—these will follow shortly.

One will be a series of posters for home printing and display in home and manse windows designed by the 3Generate team, a tiny way of enabling us to witness to our neighbours.

We would like to collate your ideas for celebrating Easter this year. To submit your ideas please click here
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd2t81ISnMkw5J5s4FvCcymo8YrrTLr-llybeKYlasokP9hfdg/viewform?usp=sf_link

We are also working with the Faith and Order liturgical sub-committee to produce a special act of worship, which will include Holy Communion, to be used when we return to our buildings.

Mission

There are so many ways in which we can serve our neighbours, witness to our faith, and speak of the hope within us. Practically please make sure that groups who usually use your building have chaplaincy provision at this time—especially support groups such as Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous and food banks. (Please see new advice on the website about this). We will share more in the coming weeks.

There have been some questions about how to pay Staff during this period. Our Secretary of Conference reminds us:

These are strange times in which the Church is called to bear witness. Part of that witness is to model what it means to be responsible employers and responsible citizens. It seems to those who’ve been asked for advice on this that if we start from this point we should not be looking to lay off staff unless or until that becomes absolutely necessary and not to do so to draw on state aid unless or until our own resources have been depleted. Our advice remains that churches should use their reserves if they have them and circuits should use reserves to support churches.
Our HR team has provided guidance on furloughed workers here:

This might also be a moment to remind Methodist people that the Church still needs their gifts even though they are not able to put those gifts on a collection plate. Many Methodists already give by Standing Order; internet and telephone banking offer ways in which members can continue to contribute and there may be others.

You can find information on how to arrange giving on line at www.give.net

If you are having cash flow problems in your church or circuit please see the FAQ’s on the website for how to find support.

Sabbaticals

We have had queries around sabbaticals. Understandably, ministers want to be around at this time of crisis for the nations for their people. However, the truth is we do not know how long this crisis will last. Serious questions need to be asked about the viability of deferring sabbaticals in order to self-isolate. We hope that people who have a sabbatical booked at this time will use them (albeit in a very different way to what was planned). The Assistant Secretary has written to all District Sabbaticals groups stating:

Our circumstances are unusual but our processes around sabbaticals are unchanged and so we will continue to require that SO 744 is applied and this is the advice we have given here: https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/coronavirus/official-guidance/

As you know the oversight of sabbaticals is the responsibility of the District Sabbaticals Advisory Group which reports through the DPC to the Synod. If a minister wishes to change the agreed arrangements, the permission of the District is required and the expectation would be that the Sabbaticals Advisory Group would make the recommendation to the Synod through the DPC. If the change means that the sabbatical would be taken more than 12 months before or after the specified year, then special permission is required. Before any change is made consultation with the Circuit and/or District is necessary as a change will impact on future planning. In any event a sabbatical may not be taken in the first year of a new appointment.

I am sure you will have realised that the deferment of a sabbatical has implications for the work of the circuit, district and wider connexion. The current situation is serious and demands a pastoral response from us but there will also be great challenges for all those in ministry as we move on into whatever the future holds for us.

For all these reasons, and fully recognising that it may be hard for those involved, our advice is that **sabbaticals should be taken at the time planned** even if that means that the time is spent differently. I am sure that Sabbaticals Advisory Groups will be sympathetic and supportive of changed programmes. There may be exceptions to this, for good reasons and the responsibility for making decisions about sabbaticals that do not fall within the special categories as defined in SO 744(c) lies with the District. I am sure that you will make appropriate and wise decisions as you consider any requests to change arrangements.
What Next?

In the weeks to come we will start to ask the questions about what is next for the Methodist Church. How might we rebuild, replant, and plant in new ways – sharing the good that God has done. For now, we encourage each person to be kind to themselves and to each other. Reaching out to people takes time and energy – we cannot simply do all that we did before and cope with this emergency.

Be assured that our Connexionalism brings great strength, we do not operate alone, to quote:

The connexional principle prompts us to face the challenges and hard work of living in relationship with others. Where isolation, individualism and suspicion impair relationships, such a witness to other ways of being can offer life-giving possibilities. In emphasising relationships of mutuality and interdependence, the connexional principle helps us to reveal something of the love and nature of God. Although working out the practical implications of being a connexional Church in the twenty-first century is challenging (as it was in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries), the Conference is confident that the Methodist people have the resources and the determination to undertake this task. Above all, we affirm our confidence in God, who calls us into connexion, and sustains us in relationship. (Conference report: The gift of Connexionalism in the 21st Century)

So, we invite you – find a time to stop, to pray, to listen for God, for we know that our Lord will bring about goodness from this terrible situation - for that is what God does!

Be assured of our prayers

Yours faithfully

Paul Wood **Interim Director of the Ministries Team**

Jude Levermore **Head of Mission**