



The Church of England  
in Essex and East London  
Diocese of Chelmsford

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1.3)*

As I write to you, the whole world is gripped by the fear of uncertainty in ways that most of us in this country have hardly known before. The challenge of the coronavirus pandemic affects every person and every community. However, I want to write with reassurance. As followers of Jesus Christ we are the custodians of a living hope; nothing less than the firm and joyful conviction that in Jesus Christ God has already won the victory over sin, desolation, uncertainty and death. This doesn't mean that we are immune from the sufferings of the world, nor that we should not take the same sensible precautions as everyone else. But it does mean that we of all people need not be overtaken by despair. Moreover, we have a particular vocation to offer our nation and our local communities the hope and the medicine of the gospel.

As you will have heard, we are now having to do this in a new way. Public worship is having to stop for a season. Our usual pattern of Sunday services and other midweek gatherings must be put on hold. But this does not mean that the Church of England has shut up shop. Far from it.

The archbishops of Canterbury and York have set us three challenges:

1. Remembering how vital it is to observe strictly the protocols of hygiene and, where necessary, self-isolation, we are still encouraged to continue a pattern of daily prayer and, where possible, a daily Eucharist. Even at very small services, we must still refrain from touch, distance ourselves from each other, share the peace differently, and only receive Holy Communion in one kind.

This will not be public worship that everyone can attend, but an offering of prayer and praise for the nation and for the world. I call upon the clergy and lay ministers of our diocese to rise to this challenge. We may not be able to pray with our nation as we have been used to, but we can pray *for* our nation. And if we are going to see this happen, we will need lay people to share the leadership. Could those of you who are working from home, offer yourself to go on a rota to ensure that two or three people are offering prayer every day?

2. We need to use all the opportunities of the digital environment to propagate the good news of the Gospel as one of the ways of confronting the COVID-19 virus with the healing balm of Christ. If churches have the resources to live stream then they should do so. This will enable the people of God and anyone and everyone who looks to God for support and meaning in this time of crisis to participate in the life of worship at home. We are also producing resources for prayer and worship in the home. This will be especially important for those who are self-isolating. Today we are putting together a short service of spiritual communion which can be said at home by those who are not able to receive Holy Communion in church at the moment. The Cathedral is live streaming Morning and Evening prayer every day. We are planning to increase this service and we will provide advice and guidance to other



churches who want to do similar. There is a weekly sermon podcast available on the website. We plan to develop this into a short act of worship which can be viewed and listened to each week.

3. Just as we need to pray for our nation, we must serve our nation too. Our belonging to Christ is not just about watching a live streamed service on the phone, but being the hands and heart of Christ in our local communities. With our sisters and brothers from other Christian churches and with all people of goodwill, we must be in the forefront of providing practical care and support for the most poor and the most vulnerable. Many people are going to suffer during these coming months as the coronavirus reaches its peak. There will be many deaths. We offer our services to all those who are beginning to think through how best to provide for those in need. We look to join with those who are already caring for the most vulnerable.

And who are the most vulnerable people in your community? How can you reach out to them? In particular, what can you do to support the homeless in your area, those whose livelihoods are at risk, and especially those without financial security, and what can you do to ensure that your local food bank is well supplied?

Many elderly and at risk people are sensibly self-isolating. We need to find ways of being in touch with them. I've already heard about new email groups and WhatsApp groups being set up in churches and neighbourhoods to keep people in touch with each other. When our churches are open again on Sundays, let it be the case that more people want to attend because they have seen the gospel in action through our lives of service.

What a tragedy it would be, if people thought that we were pulling up the drawbridge and isolating ourselves from the world we are called to serve. We are not. We are making some sensible and socially responsible changes to our day to day life, cancelling some things, postponing others, meeting online where we can; public worship is stopping for a time. But the life of worship, witness and service goes on.

As the archbishops have said, "Being a member of the Church of England is going to look very different in the days ahead. Our life is going to be less characterised by attendance at church on Sunday, and more characterised by the prayer and service we offer each day... This is a defining moment for the Church of England. Are we truly a church for the nation, or just the church for ourselves. We urge you, sisters and brothers, to become a different sort of church in these coming months: rooted in the offering of prayer and praise and overflowing in service to the world."

In the diocese, we will continue to keep the website updated as the best way of keeping you informed. Please look at it regularly. This guidance for churches is reviewed every day by a group I have set up to oversee our response to the pandemic. There are also links to the national advice on the Church of England website. Please let us know what you're doing. It will be a great encouragement to hear from how different churches are responding to this challenge. We can publicise it in the website.

If you need further advice, please turn first to your area dean, though bishops and archdeacons are of course available.

I want to commend the faithfulness of clergy and lay ministers, churchwardens and church officers whom I have already heard in these past few days are working so hard to minister to people in this time of need.

For myself, there is a particular sadness as these are my last few weeks as your bishop, and I would, of course, have wished the circumstances for my farewell to be rather different. The farewell events centred on the Chrism Eucharist and Easter Sunday are now cancelled as public events. However they will take place and will be live streamed for people to participate in a different way. Further details will be available soon

It has been a huge joy to serve as your bishop and I thank you for your faithfulness. This Sunday is Mothering Sunday, a day when we think and pray about families and households and when we give thanks for the Church which is our mother too. It is a good day to make a fresh resolve to be the church in and for our local communities, but in a new way.

Our archbishops have invited us to make this day a National Day of Prayer and Action. In particular we are asked to light a candle at 7pm on Sunday evening and put it in our window as a sign of the hope we have in Christ. You might also resolve to ring someone who is isolated and vulnerable. Or buy an extra item and place it in your local food bank. And when you wash your hands, say the Lord's Prayer.

Finally, can we see within this crisis a great opportunity to live and share the gospel? Even if the world finds a vaccination tomorrow and all this quickly fades away, what is happening in our nation at the moment reminds us of our mortality, of the provisionality and fragility of so many things we think of as secure, and opens up a space where each of us may find ourselves asking what really matters in life? where is life going? and amid life's fragilities and uncertainties, where shall I place my hope?

I am not ashamed to tell you that I have found myself feeling uncertain and anxious as I have turned on the news each day and watched the spread of this pandemic. But neither am I ashamed to say that my hope is in Christ. He is the one who, in sharing our life on earth, even our suffering and death, has brought us into an everlasting communion with God.

Please be assured of my prayers; and please join me in praying for our nation, that the living hope we have in Christ may be our security and our peace.

+ Stephen Chalmers