

Dear Friends,

It will have been a strange experience for all of us to keep the Fifth Sunday of Lent in the absence of the people we serve. As the weekend has gone on, the extent of the crisis has become clearer. The speed with which new cases are doubling is now down to three or four days and there have been a number of deaths in Lancashire.

At the same time there has been a growing realisation that our lives are going to be impacted in some way for the next six months and that the current lockdown arrangements may be in place for a considerable period of time to come.

As the initial flurry of activity dies down, it is important now that we set for ourselves sustainable patterns for life and ministry. That means finding regular rhythms for church life; be that distributing resources for worship, serving the vulnerable and staying in touch with church members. It also of course means setting new routines for yourself, especially around prayer. And don't panic about empty time, but use it as the gift it is. The time may come when church leaders are once again very busy.

In any case, it has become apparent on the recent clergy ring round that the pastoral challenges for many of you are becoming more acute. Please be assured of constant prayer in this challenging period for ministry.

I spoke about the work of the task group in supporting our parishes on BBC Radio Lancashire at the weekend. If you didn't hear it, or want to listen again, you can find my interview with John Gillmore [here on BBC Sounds](#) (listen from 01h 21m 42s).

In this briefing we have:

- Some advice about communicating key messages well
- Information about domestic abuse in the lockdown

If you go to our website you will find all the relevant guidance extracted from the task group briefings and arranged into a compendium under separate headings. It's all far more accessible; just click each heading at the top of the compendium page to drop straight to the piece of information you want. Access it via the link the top of our [main coronavirus page](#) or just go straight to the compendium [here](#). This was a large piece of work and thank you to those who undertook it.

During the week we will send out some ideas for keeping Holy Week and also advice for uploading streamed or recorded services, something which was an use for many of you this weekend.

Any question or queries, please email: coronavirus@blackburn.anglican.org. **Please also email if you are unwell or self-isolating.**

Some Advice about Communicating Key Messages Well

Sadly, the news is going to worsen before it starts to improve around the pandemic. It is vital that as leaders within our community we play our part in giving out the right messages not just to our congregations but the wider community.

It is essential that we communicate clearly and on a regular basis with our congregations as far as we are able. We need to appropriately respond when there is a significant change in the messages or the tone of those messages coming from government. It is equally essential that any communications we share, through whatever medium, does not contradict government or NHS guidance in any way.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>

https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMlt5PfwcW_6AIViKztCh3Z2gr5EAAYASAAEgl_uvD_BwE

In the midst of the pressure of the next few weeks it may be hard to focus on the messages that are needed. If you can plan ahead and draft brief messages that you can quickly adapt at the time they are needed it can help when you are feeling under pressure and not sure where to start.

A possible pattern for such a brief message would be:

- A comment about a recent headline or change in focus from the government
- A word of encouragement
- A clear message of action that needs to be taken or continued reflected in a scripture or some other Christian writing.

Below are some examples how such messages might look for you to use or adapt. They are not in any particular order but follow the suggested pattern outlined above.

Planning ahead

In these unprecedented times, with senior members of government falling ill as well as people in our local communities we need to hope for the best but start to plan for the worst. We have seen that the virus does not pick and choose its victims. No matter how good we are at handwashing and taking precautions we are still vulnerable. So please think about how you will make sure you are able to manage – be practical and make sure you know who you will ask to help you if you need it. If you make plans whilst you are well it will be easier if you fall ill. Remember Psalm 146: 8-10, “God watches us all and he will uphold us, as we trust in Him.”

Temptation to relax what we are doing

You will have noticed that we are hearing about more and more people getting the virus. Unfortunately, that is what happens in a pandemic like this. Please do not think that what we are all doing does not matter and is not making a difference. It is vital and it is making a difference. Remember Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, “For we are one body even if we are many” (I Corinthians 12:12-31) We are saving lives because we are slowing the spread by distancing ourselves from each other, which means those who need intensive care in hospital are getting it.

Marathon not a sprint

These are difficult and challenging times, but it is humbling to see how all our communities are pulling together and despite the restrictions finding new ways to be. It is important for all of us to remember that this will be a marathon not a sprint and that we

all need to continue to pull together and pull each other through when we start to struggle. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-13). So please continue to look out for neighbours and friends. Keep making contact with folks and offering a word of encouragement....don't forget old fashioned letter writing for those without internet.

Reality of the pandemic

All our efforts will make a difference, but sadly nothing can stop the virus infecting a large part of the community. That is the nature of a virus, I am afraid. But what we are all doing is helping to ensure the virus infects as few as possible and, hopefully, mainly those who are able to weather the infection at home with few long-term consequences. So, keep going, keep following the guidance and keep praying for each other. Remember what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans at the end of chapter 8 "...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8: 37-39).

Increasing fear

It is so hard to only be in contact virtually. There are times when all of us are tempted to visit a family member or a friend, particularly if they are really struggling or are ill themselves. But if we leave our house and go to another we risk taking the virus with us or bringing the virus back... either way we risk two households getting ill rather than just one. So we all need to think very, very carefully. None of us is immune, all of us are vulnerable...so please stick with the government guidance. Together we can make a difference. As Psalm 23 reminds us, we are walking through the darkest valley but with God by our side we will be restored.

Increasing number of deaths

These are such hard and difficult times as we hear about more and more people we know getting ill and the ever increasing number of deaths. There are no words of comfort that will ease the pain of those who have been unable to go to a funeral of a loved one. But we are people of hope and we need to continue to pray and continue to offer words of encouragement where we can. Psalm 143 verse 7-10 remind us of God's steadfast love in the face of adversity

Information about Domestic Abuse in the Lockdown

With families shut in together for long periods of time, there is evidence that this now becoming more of an issue. If you are dealing with an issue of domestic abuse, please note that regulations have been relaxed such that victims are now allowed to leave the house. Advice from Lancashire Victim Services can be found here:

<https://lancashirevictimservices.org/victims/victim-domestic-abuse/self-isolating-with-an-abuser/>

Finally, please note that Bishop Julian has been invited by Premier Christian Radio to say prayers following the Government's daily briefing today. You can listen [from 5pm here](#). Bishop Julian will pray as soon as the briefing is over.

***Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy
in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

Amen.

Yours,

Bishop Philip and the Coronavirus Task Group