

5 November 2020

Dear Friends,

**Pastoral Letter for the Churches of East Midlands Synod
at the beginning of the second lockdown**

The return to lockdown has come as a stark and painful reminder of the reality of the Covid-19 virus and the immense risk it poses. Even if we recognise the reasoning behind the call for lockdown we may be feeling a range of emotions – disappointment, frustration and fear – and all the more so because, having endured one lockdown and emerging from it, there is perhaps a deeper sense of anguish that life has become so restricted again. The Psalmist's cry, *How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?*" (Psalm 13: 2), may well speak for how many of us are feeling.

I have no simple remedy or magic wand but write this letter in the hope it will reassure you that I recognise and acknowledge the significant challenge lockdown poses for us all – as individuals and churches. I am conscious of the levels of tiredness and anxiety of ministers, elders and members: for those churches that have relatively recently begun to hold in-person services there is bound to be a sense of frustration and despair that we are now prohibited from doing so. I recognise that many of us are grieving for the consolation of corporate worship, in the familiar and treasured setting of our local churches. Not being able to sing has made some of us realise afresh just how significant our hymn-singing was. Subjecting the logistics of celebrating Holy Communion to a clinical exercise in church or the necessity of separation with individually prepared elements at home have reminded us of the essential nature of this sacramental means of grace as a congregational act. Preaching in-person to a congregation whose masked faces give us no clue of response or on-screen to a camera that doesn't enable us to engage with a gathered congregation – or a screen of 'tiles' on Zoom, where part of the congregation is out of sight on the 'next page' - has made us pine for the joy and privilege of doing so where we are under the same roof. The anguish and exhaustion experienced by those who seek to reach those in our churches who do not – or will not – use virtual means of connection is significant: the preparation and distribution of liturgies and resources on paper or on CD has come as a challenge that many have embraced with energy and devotion. To say nothing of the acquisition of new skills of using digital means to conduct worship. I appreciate and acknowledge that for those congregations currently in vacancy there may be the feeling of ever greater isolation.

All that I have said so far relates to the Church as a worshipping community. Corporate worship is the core activity of the Church that is currently prohibited from taking place in our buildings. It is significant that the embodiment of the Church's identity as the caring community, however, is not prohibited by lockdown – namely, where our buildings are places of "urgent public support services".

It is tempting to resort to a special plea for our churches to be allowed to remain open for corporate worship. Some of our ecumenical partners are doing precisely that. The Synod Moderators, meeting this week, resolved not to make such a case and our General Assembly Moderators, The Revd Clare Downing and Mr Peter Pay, have issued a statement that *Love of God and love of neighbour are inseparable in the Christian faith. Seeking to protect the most vulnerable from the spread of COVID 19 is an act of love through which we love God.* I commend their reflection (which can be found on the United Reformed Church website: <https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/3640-urc-general-secretary-comments-on-new-four-week-lockdown.html>) The government guidance accompanies this letter.

I am grateful to the colleague who suggested that whilst we are all in the same storm we are not in the same boat. The impact of the lockdown and the risks posed by the virus affect us differently. But, within the family that is East Midlands Synod, we are each and all dependent on the One who stilled the storm (even though those sailing with him thought he was asleep and oblivious) (Mark 4: 35-41).

I conclude with a prayer of lament – offered in the hope it articulates the despair we are feeling yet leads us to praise and trust:

*God, beyond, above, unreachable, untouchable, unfathomable,
yet seen, among us, and known, in Jesus ... how could you watch and not stop this evil pandemic?
Why would you not end it in moments rather than watching it unfold with its hurt and harm,
bringing its ambush of death, fear and loss?
And for that death, fear and loss to dip, with the possibility of picking up normality,
to break out again with potential for more and worse than before!
Yet in the midst of this - even this - you are there ...
Grant peace, calm and comfort ...
give us patience and stamina ...
hasten the day when Covid is conquered and loss is lessened.
Make us grateful for what and whom we can reach and touch and do.
Keep safe those who have little to nothing
and prompt those who can do something for and with them.
For even in the midst of this we will dare to carry on trusting and praising.*
(Geoffrey Clarke, October 2020)

Yours



*Geoffrey S. Clarke,
Moderator*