

WEEKLY MESSAGE FROM OUR VICAR, ALEX – 29th July 2021

Dear Church Family Members,

Hoping you're all well and having a good week.

Huge thanks to all who braved the rain and delivered donations for our food bank collection yesterday - we have another good haul to take off to the Epsom & Ewell Food Bank, which is great.

The booking links for our services at both churches this week are as follows (as explained below we will be continuing to book for services for now - more information on the rationale of this later in this email):

To attend St. Paul's at 9 am on Sunday 1st August, please book on this link:
<https://forms.gle/SofXP4ovfAkhyhTJ8>

To attend St. Mary's at 11 am on Sunday 1st August, please book on this link:
<https://forms.gle/6XFpMtSEWErqqA5M9>

Both services will continue to be Zoomed as is our current practice.

The main focus (below) for the rest of this email is to explain the decisions that have been made regarding covid safety in our services for the next couple of months. These will be in place until the next PCC meeting on 20th September, when they will be reviewed again according to guidance (Diocese & other) and local infection rates.

Thank you very much to the PCC members who thought this through so carefully with me in our meeting on Monday evening.

As always, please do chat if you have any questions.

Love and prayers,
Alex
(07312 113019)

COVID SAFETY IN OUR CHURCHES FOR THE NEXT COUPLE OF MONTHS

As we are all aware, the Government lifted all Covid restrictions on Monday 19th July.

The Church of England and the Diocese have urged all church leaders and PCCs to make decisions over covid safety which

- continue to manage the risks of covid as safely as possible
- take into account the needs of the more vulnerable members of our church family (ie thinking of the needs of others - rather than our own wishes as our focus)
- and demonstrate responsible love & care for all

Decisions over COVID measures are now being made in each individual parish, according to the unique circumstances of different areas and different groups of people.

I wrote to you last week, seeking your preferences on topics such as social distancing, mask wearing, singing and sharing the peace. Thank you so much to everyone who responded, it has been very helpful.

The PCC and I then met on Monday evening and discussed all the findings, which are shared below with the decisions which we think are wise for the current time and which will be reviewed again in our next PCC meeting on Monday 20th September.

We have tried to go with the majority preferences wherever possible as will also be shown below.

At the bottom of the outcomes to the key questions asked are some further general points, which were highlighted by some of you and which we discussed as part of the process.

Sharing the Peace

The easiest decision to make, following everyone's responses is that - for now - we will continue to share the peace by waving & nodding at each other, including those on Zoom.

76% of respondents said that their preference is to keep waving for now.

10% suggested elbow or fist pumps

14% are happy to share the peace by shaking hands, but would avoid those who are uncomfortable (there was a suggestion that perhaps those who don't wish to share the peace could stay seated) and would hand sanitise afterwards.

The majority, by far, wished to keep waving & nodding.

This will next be reviewed at the PCC meeting on Monday 20th September.

Mask Wearing

Again, this was an easy decision to make (because of the high majority preference): For now, we will ask you to continue to wear masks when you enter the church building for worship, until you exit at the end.

73% of respondents said that they would prefer us to still wear masks

Of these 3% suggested that if someone refuses to wear a mask then it may be helpful for them to be asked to sit at the front of the church to keep others safe (I will not be asking this of anyone - but instead will ask everyone to consider the needs and wishes of others around them)

10% of respondents said that they would prefer to stop wearing masks, but are happy to continue to do so if others would prefer to keep them

16% of respondents stated that they would like to stop wearing masks and of these 3% wished to put them on during the sharing of communion and 3% wished to review according to local infection rates over time

This request does not apply to children under 12 and does not apply to the medically exempt. Please do chat with me about any concerns you may have in this regard.

This will next be reviewed at the PCC meeting on Monday 20th September.

Singing in Church

From this Sunday (August 1st) we will begin to sing again in church, but we will ask everyone (excepting children under 12 and those who are exempt) to keep their masks on to do so.

94% of respondents would like some kind of singing to resume.

Of this 94% 17% of people said that they would prefer this to be outside

Of this 94% a different 37% (ie not including the 17% above) of people would only feel comfortable singing inside with masks on

Of this 94% a different 20% of people would prefer to start by singing some of the songs only so that everyone can regain confidence in this

Of this 94%, the remaining 23% had no additional stipulations

Additional comments made:

27% of respondents said that it would be sensible to ask those who are keen to sing to sit at the front and those who are nervous about singing to sit nearer the back

11% of respondents commented that having some services where there is singing and some where there isn't would probably not be helpful

The approach taken by PCC to decide to sing all songs, but keep masks on was an attempt to 'go down the middle' of all the different suggestions.

This will next be reviewed at the PCC meeting on Monday 20th September.

Social Distancing in Church

Of the decisions made, this was the most complicated! We would ask you to bear with us in the process which we will go through on this.

For now, we will continue to keep 2 metre social distancing, however over the next few weeks we will experiment with how to make church look 'more like church used to':

From the 29th August,

- We will re-establish rows (though there will be some rows which people do sit on and others which they don't)
- We will also re-establish choice over where people sit (thank you for your patience up to now in sitting in allocated places, which - although trying to take into account hearing & other specific needs people have shared - has not always been to everyone's ideal!)

53% of respondents stated that they would prefer to keep to 2 metre social distancing for the current time

6% suggested reducing to 1.5 metres

22% suggested reducing to 1 metre

3% suggested sitting on alternate rows and sitting 1,2,3 (appropriate number) of seats apart

12% suggested social distancing isn't needed any more, but 3% suggested they would be happy to continue if others would like it

3% suggested having church half and half- 2m social distancing in one half and none in the other

3% were happy to go with the majority

A key point made, for us all to be aware of, is that little children do not understand 2 metres, 1 metre (etc). The parents who fed back on the questions are keen to support those who would like social distancing, but ask for understanding and kindness where their little ones unwittingly wander nearer to others than intended.

The approach taken by PCC here, was to try and honour the majority - over half of respondents still wish to keep 2 metre social distancing for now; but also to try and honour those who would like things to start to change by reshaping what the 2-metre social distancing looks like.

We have made the date of the 29th August to give time to experiment and re-prepare the churches. This will follow the joint service on Zoom on the 22nd August and so also gives extra time for those who will be involved in helping move the furniture for the revised church layout.

This will next be reviewed at the PCC meeting on Monday 20th September.

Some Further General Points:

Some further points were raised by a number of you and were discussed at PCC and in addition to the points above:

- 1) Zoom provision will continue for both services: Zoom is a new gift from the last 16 months which will stay with us as an additional tool for meetings and worship probably forever now, which can be applied as appropriate to different events. 16% of respondents to the questions do not feel safe enough (for medical or other reasons) or ready to return to church yet and will continue to join us from Zoom for the foreseeable future.
- 2) Our Monthly Joint Service will continue on Zoom for now, due to the higher numbers of people and also to enable those who are continuing on Zoom regularly for the moment to be able to see the rest of us and us them more easily
- 3) Booking for services will continue (at least until 20th September): one thing the government has requested is that a registering system continues for events, including worship, and this is a good way of doing this as well as planning for those who come. This is so that if there is a covid outbreak, we know who may be affected by it and can let you know swiftly.
- 4) Communion will continue in one kind only - although we are actually allowed to consider using the cup & sharing wine with one another, this is simply not safe or sensible at the current time.
- 5) Cleaning, good ventilation, hand sanitisation and other sensible measures will remain in place - everyone will continue to be asked to hand sanitise on arriving at the churches (to protect each other from the spread of germs) and everyone will continue to be asked to hand sanitise on the way out (to protect the local community from any germs which we still may have amongst us)
- 6) A more adaptable approach will be needed for Messy Church and Community Alive, the services where we have most children at each church: Although social distancing measures will still be in place for the adults, children need to interact and be able to be free (as far as their parents are happy with) to engage with one another - as they do at school. It is important that they can really enjoy the craft activities, games, role play activities and other items planned for them. Safety measures will still be in place for these services, but they will need their own risk assessments and different planning.

7) Each group activity will need its own risk assessment: although safety plans for group activities will be expected to be in line with the decisions for worship, individual risk assessments will be needed for each of these as we begin to open out again from September (consultations are currently taking place with team leaders on plans for the autumn)

8) Refreshments: Although we would all love to share refreshments with one another after services, as it is a key part of church in usual times, we have decided not to restart refreshments at the current time. As with each of the decisions made, this will be reviewed at the next PCC meeting on the 20th September.

This decision about refreshments does not apply to the group & outreach activities in the week (where numbers are generally smaller), and decisions on how to approach this in each different circumstance will be made by the team leaders and myself, jointly.

These points will next be reviewed at the PCC meeting on Monday 20th September.

I hope it is helpful to have read our thinking and you now feel confident about what to expect on Sunday at church and why.

Thank you again to all who took time to answer the questions either in email or discussion. It has been greatly appreciated.

Love and prayers,
Alex

Rev Alex Stevens
Vicar
Parish of Nork with Burgh Heath

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