

Pastoral Letter #6 | 28th June 2020

***I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.***

Isaiah 43:19, NRSV

Dear

Yesterday I was Received into Full Connexion by the Methodist Conference. But rather than physically being 'at' conference the reception had to happen via online streaming. Many of you know I was disappointed things couldn't happen as they were originally planned, but I have to say that yesterday felt quite overwhelming and meaningful. In the end it was quite wonderful for me and my colleagues to be Received into Full Connexion from the places we live and serve across the connexion.



Waking up this morning, I realise there is an important message for me, and I think for us as church, that God is wanting us to take note of. That despite the wilderness of uncertainty that brings change and unpredictability, God makes a way through the wilderness. God's river still flows in the desert. God can still be found in the unexpected. The new can be as fruitful as the old.

As we journey through the continuing unknowns of lockdown and transition towards the future, I am becoming convinced that God is up to something! Something new preparing to spring forth – if we are willing to perceive it, embrace it and 'go' with the river's flow.

Worship at Home Pack

Enclosed, please find Worshipping Together for July, including another 'new' opportunity. On Sunday 5th we will share a Love Feast together as part of our Worship on the Phone. Information about what this is, how it will work and how you can prepare for it are included within the booklet.

Building Updates & Transition Process

Many of you will be aware that the government has indicated that from July 4th places of worship, along with many others buildings and organisations, are allowed to begin increasing activity within them again, as long as they operate in a covid-secure way. As I write, we still await the accompanying guidance from government and subsequent connexional guidance, although we do have some connexional guidance already.

While I have initiated some provisional planning with our church officers and property teams, without the government guidance it is not possible for us to know all the measures we will (or will not) need to put in place for each of our buildings to be able to resume gathered worship and other gathered activity. Therefore, no dates have been set so far for the resumption of physical worship in any of our buildings at this present time.

Felpham: At Felpham we still intend to have the toilets renovated through August, (even before lockdown, we were expecting to 'lockdown' FMC through the summer!) so it is likely gathered worship will not be able to begin again until that work is completed.

Bognor Regis and Westergate: The risk management work that is necessary to be undertaken, alongside the fact that the shielding programme does not enter its 'pause' until August means we also expect it to be some weeks before we can physically gather safely for worship again.

The decision of when to reopen will, in the end, rest with the Managing Trustees for each church. However, gathering as church councils is also currently not possible and many of our trustees are also not online. Therefore I will be working with church officers to formulate our transition plans and when we are in a position to do so, will communicate with Trustees to explain how we will ensure the consultation and decisions that are needed are undertaken appropriately.

Being Church: Gathered and Scattered

One of the most important things in our minds as we begin this planning (and I will ensure it stays important!) is to ensure to the best of our ability the health, safety and well-being of all God's people is at its heart. I want to be transparent and clear that as much as I want to be physically gathering as God's people once again, I will not be prepared to move us to the next stages of re-opening our buildings until we have ensured we have taken the steps we need to take.

We are still within a global pandemic which is expected to be with us until well into 2021. Rather than returning to the past, we are transitioning towards an as-yet-uncertain future. Given the implications of the continued need for social distancing, it already seems clear that increasing activity within our buildings will not be a case of returning to how things were pre-coronavirus.

We have spent many weeks scattered as God's community of faith, and even as we begin to gather again at some point in the future, we need to remind ourselves that being church is to both gather and scatter. Jesus gathered his disciples together, then sent them out in small groups for mission. Being a 'scattered' church is likely to need to become a stronger part of our long-term identity than we may feel it was pre-lockdown.

In our being scattered these past weeks there is much that has been of value and strengthened us as a community of faith. I know from conversations that many of you feel relationships and pastoral care has strengthened in this time, that people have got to know each other better because the busyness and activity of church events and meetings has not been in the way. Some of those who were unable to get to physically gathered worship have felt more connected than before because of the emails, post and worship at home resources. As we prepare to enter this transition phase, we must ask ourselves what aspects of being scattered church we should maintain (permanently, or as part of the transition) as we embrace being the community of God that both gathers and scatters.

The certainty of the Faithfulness of God

When the Israelites had passed through the Red Sea and entered the wilderness on their journey to the promised land, rather than trust in the faithfulness of God to them, some began to want to take matters into their own hands and want to return to Egypt. They didn't know where they would get food or water from, whereas back in Egypt those practical staples were a certainty. I sometimes wonder if they forgot that living in Egypt also meant living in slavery.

Living in lockdown has felt like something of a wilderness at times and as we prepare ourselves for the transition, the fact we cannot return to our past means those wilderness feelings will not necessarily go away. Plenty of uncertainty remains. But as we do journey into the future, we do so able to trust in the certainty that God is faithful to us.

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In peace & hope, Rev Dan