

Ready for the new “normal”

A discussion paper for a pandemic recovery and resumption plan

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Many people are asking, “When the lockdown starts to ease, what MUST resume, what SHOULDN’T and what might we do differently?” This document is drawn together from discussion with our local churches and officers serving the Church. It aims to help churches making a plan now to carry them past lockdown and into a healthy future.

This document is split into three parts.

The **first part offers you a road map** to start to think about the journey ahead, including taking some time to reflect on where you find yourself now, and how you might travel forwards.

The **second part deals with some very practical issues** about being ready to resume activities. It covers some issues of good practice and provides a series of questions covering many areas of church life. They are largely framed as questions, because your particular context and circumstances will not be the same as that of another church. Please seek advice from the Synod Office if you are unsure about what to do. The issues are grouped according to a timeline – what should you be thinking about and planning whilst the **lockdown** phase continues, how will you get your building ready to **start up** activity again, and what to practice during a **social distancing** phase, which is very likely to continue for many months after the lockdown and until the pandemic ends and threat of widespread reinfection passes.

The **third part of the document provides some wider questions of principle**, taking you further with the questions you began to consider in the first part when you looked at road map. Without in *any* way following a line that God sent this virus for a purpose, there is plenty in the Bible to show that God takes awful situations and brings forth good from them. One aspect of this might well be that churches take stock and re-focus on what really matters to them and more importantly to God, rather than unthinkingly falling back into old patterns and habits. Part 3 of this paper will help Elders and others to start to consider how things might be done differently in light of the new circumstances in which we unwillingly find ourselves.

Different people will need to consider the questions posed here at different points.



Some relate most closely to the **Minister/Elder** in Local Leadership (ELL)



Some questions relate to the functions of the **Elders’ Meeting** (which includes your Minister/ELL).



Some need the involvement of the whole **Church Meeting**.

Inevitably, in our conciliar governance, there will be overlap in the consideration and in making decisions. Remember that you are not alone in this. Your Synod Officers are available to help you.

PART 1

START HERE: A Road Map for the Way Ahead

Facing an uncertain future

What seemed like a distant threat at the beginning of 2020 has become a present reality, changing lives and the way we live indefinitely. Some adapted easily to life under lock down, others have found the experience hugely traumatic and damaging to their mental health. Many have had to navigate the tricky waters of grief – hard enough in “ordinary” times. Coronavirus restrictions have made this even harder, and we must be aware of those who have not begun to grieve properly, or grieve well.

Coronavirus restrictions and social distancing are inevitably going to be part of our life for many months to come until an effective vaccine is developed and deployed to the majority of the population (if that proves to be possible at all). The most vulnerable, including those over the age of 70, are likely to be the last to be able to fully reintegrate into society, and given the demographic of our churches that means that our common life together is not likely to get to a recognisable “normal” until, probably, the middle of 2021 at the earliest, and perhaps for much, much longer.

This presents a huge challenge to our churches, one with spiritual, emotional, physical and financial – even existential – dimensions. Yes, we are, as individuals, secure in God’s love. Yes, the Church of Jesus Christ will continue – even, “the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (Mt 16:16 NRSV).

However, church life as we know it will be different for a long time, perhaps forever, and rather than being fearful of this, we have an opportunity to shape how we will live well through the pandemic and emerge stronger – yes, **stronger** – on the other side.

Looking forward in hope

As this resource is being prepared we are between Easter and Pentecost. One colleague observed how appropriate that is. Like the first disciples, we are waiting to discover God’s new intention for us. It would be easy to look backwards at how things used to be. It would be easy to assume that we can get back to that state – and even make plans to “resume fishing on Galilee.” Having all experienced the pandemic differently, moving forwards will happen at different speed and in different ways for each of us. Be gentle with one another – those rushing ahead and those who need longer to move forwards.

Take some time as individuals, as Elders’ Meetings/leadership teams, as a local church, to ponder where are the signs of hope? Where might we find the green shoots of new life? What shall we do differently, and how shall we live differently as we work through the pandemic and emerge into this new season?

How shall we relate positively to self, to neighbour and to God through and after this pandemic?

To ponder and discuss during the lockdown days

In terms of church life, is there anything:

- Good/valuable that you would like to continue and develop through this phase?
- That you have thought, 'I wonder if we could try this...?' as lockdown continues?

To ponder and discuss as we prepare to emerge from lockdown

As you look forward to lockdown being ended, how do you respond to the following statements? You might like to indicate your strength of feeling, positive or negative, with a score of 0 to 5 by the comment, or draw appropriate "smiley" faces to indicate warmth or coolness towards the idea, or express your neutrality.

- "We return to being church in our traditional/established ways as soon as possible."
- "We recognise that health and social restrictions will be with us for a long time and so we cannot do what we've always done at least for a long time."
- "Our return is governed by what is financially possible, appreciating that our wider church life's sustainability may have been stretched."
- "Our return, along with practical considerations on social distancing, will be shaped by discerning God's new mission for us in the post-lockdown context, (1) locally, and (2) as a denomination."
- "We learn from the lessons of the lockdown days, mindful that some churches have been able to reach parts of the community that traditional ministry didn't touch, including (but not only) through worship offered online."

Can we see the challenges and opportunities for ministry in each of these scenarios?

For reflection

We are on a journey through a pandemic, not knowing our destination, but aware we follow in a line of saints of old, who have set off before us in the footsteps of Jesus, walking the way. Like those before us, we may travel with faith and doubt, hope and fear, and, perhaps, have a holy encounter along the way. That we travel at all will mean that we are changed. Pilgrimage is about taking and risking such a journey, faith is knowing that we are accompanied by God, hope is in a Kingdom destination, and love may be experienced with companions.

Let this reflection lead you into a time of prayer, thanking God for His close presence, and asking for courage to face the uncertainties, and wisdom to understand the direction ahead and the speed at which you should travel.

PART 2

Some Practicalities

PHASE 1: DURING THE LOCKDOWN – Getting ready to re-open

Who makes the decision to re-open?



Once the lockdown phase reaches its end there will almost certainly still be some social distancing and shielding provisions in place. We will not suddenly resume “normal” life. Pay attention to advice and instruction from Government, the denomination, and insurance companies. Do not act against their advice/regulation as this puts the Elders’ Meeting (or equivalent) in significant jeopardy over liability. Nothing in this paper can be taken to supersede official advice and policy. You will need to plan for resumption, which means talking about it now.

Who should come to church?



Assume that some people will need to remain “shielded” until the threat of pandemic has passed – notably those over the age of 70 or whose health conditions make them vulnerable. As well as the physical aspects of resuming public worship, think about how you will communicate that the building is now open? Will it be for limited activities initially? Will you give notice to your wider community as well as your regular fellowship that things are starting up, and if so, how and when? Do **not** encourage those who should remain shielded to return to church during this phase, even if that means that public worship does not immediately resume in your church: the demographic of your congregation might well mean that you should **not** resume public worship for many months. This may also be true if your regular worship leaders are at increased risk from catching the virus.

What additional/alternative worship provision can you make for those unable to return to public worship immediately? Can you safely produce and distribute service/notice sheets, sermon transcripts, or worship recordings to those still at home? (Some research has shown that Covid-19 can remain active on metal and plastic surfaces for up to three days and on paper/cardboard for 24 hours.) Can you continue or start to provide live-streamed worship from the church premises, and can your stay-at-home members access it if you do? The best thing that your church might be able to do is to stay in touch with each other and remind members where broadcast services are available. Can you encourage all members of the fellowship to all tune into a particular service at the same time, remembering in prayer the others that they would normally worship alongside?

Be aware that many of our older members are likely to be resistant to the idea of staying away from church any longer. Think about how you will emphasise the importance of them following appropriate advice. Equally, be aware that some of our Elders and office-holders will feel some pressure to resume their duties: shield them from that danger as well as coronavirus. Do not allow that pressure to be exerted upon anyone, even if it means that there won’t be an organist or preacher available on particular Sundays. To do otherwise is abusive. You will need to alter plans to allow for key people not being available for an extended period.

Planning the use of space



Assume that social distancing measures will remain in place, and people outside their own household group must sit at least 2m apart – what is the new capacity of your worship area? How will you communicate and enforce the capacity limits and distancing requirements? How will you respond when visitors/potential new worshippers arrive without notice? Should you make 2m marks on floors and forecourts for those arriving? How will you close off pews/remove chairs to keep distancing in place? If you have chairs that are moveable, where will you safely stack/store excess chairs so that they don't create a hazard? Do narrow aisle and doorways mean you should implement a one-way system through the building? Prepare clear signage for your building that will be easy for everyone to read and understand quickly.

Dealing with the trauma



Many churches will have had members die during the lockdown phase – from Coronavirus or other causes. Most members will have had family members or close friends die in this period. Some will have had funerals take place that were far from normal, or will have been prevented from attending the funeral. Others will still be waiting for arrangements to be made. How will you corporately acknowledge and remember the dead, lamenting their loss? How will you acknowledge that the Body has been damaged by these deaths and, where appropriate, help others to pick up responsibilities and positions left open by these deaths? Will it be appropriate to have a joint memorial service for loved ones, or to hold a series of these services for each bereaved family? When will you be able to do this safely? Be aware that some will have become vulnerable during the weeks of lockdown, for reason of poorer mental health, finance, strained relationships and abuse. Ensure that key people are alert to the signs of abuse and neglect and know how to respond appropriately to any safeguarding issues that are presented. Be cautious about expressing thanksgiving that we can return to our buildings, when some will be acutely aware of loss.

Be aware that relationships will have been altered and broken, whether by bereavement, enduring separation, or even disagreement on the way to proceed. Give attention to this and seek healing for all who are hurting, and reconciliation wherever that is possible. Be conscious that different people will need different approaches and take different amounts of time to begin to move on from the trauma they have experienced.

The Revd Carla A. Grosch-Miller and her colleagues in the Tragedy and Christian Congregations project have researched and written about congregational trauma. Their web site at <https://tragedyandcongregations.org.uk/> offers a wealth of theological and practical resource and is well worth accessing.

PHASE 2: START UP

Preparing the buildings for resumption



This section is primarily for individuals concerned with managing church buildings, but the whole Elders Meeting will need to be aware of the contents and help with planning appropriate action.

Physical security check

Take a walk around the building and make sure that it all still looks secure. If there is evidence of a break-in, exercise caution and consider whether the police should be called. In any case, notify your insurance company and Trust Officer.

Risk assessment

Once you are happy to go back into the buildings, walk through each room in turn looking for any hazards. This should be a part of your regular monitoring of the building anyway, but this is an ideal time to take stock. Record anything of concern and what steps you take to mitigate or remove the risk. Is everything in good order? Is there unnecessary clutter which might prove an obstacle during emergency evacuation or present a fire hazard? Do the electrics look to be in good order (no broken plug sockets/switches, etc.)? Are the doors and windows sound? Is there evidence of a failing roof/water ingress? Is any emergency lighting working properly? What do you need to do next to resolve any issues found?

Legionella

If your water supply has not been drained down during the lockdown, you will need to make sure that every tap is run for a minimum of 20 minutes. Instant hot water systems need to be set to 60oC to kill off the legionella bacterium. Fuller advice is available from the Synod office.

Cleaning routines

If nobody has been accessing your building for some weeks then the virus will not have survived on any hard surfaces. Even if it has only been visited for security or a single person livestreaming worship, clean every surface that might have been touched within the last week. Remember pews/chairs, tables, microphones, pulpit/lectern, door handles, etc. This is also an ideal time to clean children's toys, books, and shelves that they can reach – regardless of any worries about coronavirus we have a responsibility to maintain a safe and healthy environment. Don't assume your usual anti-bacterial cleaners will be effective unless they have also been tested on viruses. Soap and water are still the best defence against the fatty layer around the virus. Cleaning as you go/immediately after use is far more effective than a weekly (or less often) deep clean.

PHASE 3: DURING SOCIAL DISTANCING

Using our buildings safely

Worship in the premises

Assume that social distancing measures will need to be in place for many months beyond the end of the lockdown period. Do you need to think about moving chairs further apart so that only household groups sit together, or closing off some pews to enforce distancing? Don't stack surplus chairs in an unsafe manner, or in places that will cause evacuation obstacles. Be ready for the "that's my seat" protests, but don't accept them! We have a responsibility to our members and wider society to continue to do our part in minimising virus spread, and that will mean ongoing inconvenience for us all.

Planning for public worship



Consider who will be available to take part and lead worship, and who will be available to form the congregation. Is resuming physically-gathered public safe and viable yet? Do not be afraid to say, "this is not yet the right time to resume." Leadership means taking the right decisions, even when they are difficult. **If** it is safe and practical to resume public worship in the church building ensure that practical arrangements for social distancing are in place. Consider your order of service. There is some scientific evidence that the deeper breathing associated with singing can project water droplets, and thus coronavirus, far beyond the 2m required for social distancing. It is possible therefore that communal hymn singing will still be restricted long after churches may resume their meetings for worship. Do not act against official guidance and restrictions. Have you got the means to play music as an aid to reflection (rather than singing)? Will you offer purely a service of Word and prayer? Will it be "Quaker-style," meeting largely in silence? For some, not being able to sing hymns will be as or even more unsettling as not meeting at all for worship – be aware of this dynamic, and also the change in "feel" that sitting so far apart will create. Would your church, in fact, be better continuing to use alternative means of worshipping for a longer period – distributed printed material, online worship or the services broadcast on television and radio?

Before and after worship



For the foreseeable future, assume that a friendly handshake (much less a hug and/ or kiss!) is NOT appropriate as you welcome people to worship and other activities. Make sure your welcomers/stewards know this and follow good practice. How will you handle tea and coffee after worship? Should it be resumed immediately? Think about physical distancing and the hygiene of cups, spoons, biscuits, etc. Handing someone a cup risks transferring viruses (remember you can be infected or carry coronavirus without necessarily showing symptoms). Similarly, collecting cups after use and washing them – can you issue gloves (disposable or "marigolds") for washing up? Don't put biscuits on a plate for a succession of fingers to touch, and definitely don't put them back into a tin for next week! Think about how you will wipe down tables and serving surfaces after use.

Sacraments



For Communion, think about how the elements will be distributed to prevent cross-contamination, and how the elements will be served maintaining a suitable distance between the person serving and the person receiving. Will you be able to safely resume Communion services, and if not, how will you help people to deal with that emotionally and spiritually? Assume that the Common Cup is not appropriate; neither is passing a plate and tray of glasses from hand to hand

with everyone serving themselves or their neighbour. Ensure that the President and serving Elders wash/sanitise their hands before distribution. Ensure that the vessels and cloths are properly cleaned with soap and water after use. For churches that practice communicants coming forwards to receive the elements, how will you remind them to practice social distancing as they are waiting in line and as they are served?



For Baptism (infant or believers) the same water must not be used for successive candidates. Think about how you will keep the baptismal candidate and those not in their immediate household at an appropriate distance from you and from each other.

Taking the offering



Passing the plate along rows must not be your practice for the foreseeable future. Encourage bank standing orders/transfers. Consider a basket at the back of church for people to leave their gifts as they enter (but be mindful of security.) Consider investing in a contactless machine for giving by card. Anyone handling cash should wear gloves for counting and banking. Remember to include those gifts offered through bank transfers in the prayer of dedication.

Junior Church vs All-age/Intergenerational



For churches blessed with children amongst their number, don't assume that your leaders/workers will be ready to resume their previous activities. How will you protect both child and adult from transmitting the virus? Is the room large enough to allow appropriate distancing? Are the children of an age where they won't need to be in close contact with leaders? Would it be better to offer good quality all-age/ intergenerational worship instead of "sending children out"?

Resuming lettings and church activities

Church activities in the church building



Follow all of the same advice as for public worship re greeting, social activities, cleaning, etc. Consider if the rooms you normally use for midweek meetings (prayer, Bible study, fellowship groups, children's' activities, cafes, lunch clubs, etc.) are of sufficient size to accommodate group sizes – might you need to move to a different room, limit numbers, or split into more than one group? How will you communicate this? Do you need to safely recruit new group leaders (remembering your safeguarding policy)? How soon can you restart groups that include people vulnerable by age and health condition? If you are increasing the number of groups, do you need additional support with cleaning, caretaking/furniture arrangement?

Re-opening to other congregations hosted in the building



How will you agree with hosted congregations their responsibilities to maintain appropriate good practice on distancing, cleaning routines, etc.? Will times of their services need to be altered to allow for cleaning between worship services/other lettings? Whilst we will want to offer good hospitality, this is an opportunity to address any areas of tension that existed with the hosted congregation.

Resuming external lettings



Many of the same questions as above apply – is the room adequate, can you safely accommodate the numbers required, are there any additional cleaning and caretaking requirements? Church buildings are primarily for the work of building the Kingdom of God, for delivering Christian mission. External lettings are allowable when the Church does not need the use of the space for church-related activities. Resumption from lockdown provides an excellent opportunity for Elders’ meetings (and LEP equivalents) to re-evaluate priorities. What re-structuring of your budget is necessary to accommodate any reduced income from lettings? Or do you need to increase your letting fees to help to balance any lost bookings?

Church meetings



The Basis of Union requires the Church Meeting to meet “at least once per quarter” (Basis 2.(1)). However, the Charity Commission, and the URC, accept that during the pandemic members’ meetings like this cannot take place. Follow guidance at the time of restrictions being lifted before confirming meeting dates. Consider how you will manage social distancing during the meeting. Consider how many of your members may still need to be shielded (those over 70, those with underlying health conditions, etc.) and so should not attend meetings, and use that to inform your decision whether or not it is safe to resume. Postpone non-urgent and controversial business, and make use of Elders’ meetings to deal with urgent business, making a careful minute of why the Elders are considering matters that would normally be referred to Church Meeting.

Finances



Remember the Plan for Partnership requires that payment into the Ministry & Mission Fund is, “the first charge on local church’s income” – it has a higher priority than any other expense a church will incur. (In the case of LEPs, we expect that your contribution to other denominational costs would be treated equally with M&M contributions – that is, equally, but without one denomination or another taking a higher priority: that is what it means to be in partnership.) Some of your members will be in considerably reduced financial circumstances and may not be able to resume giving at their previous level. Communicate the financial need to all members without putting any pressure on anyone, or making anyone feel guilty. Look at your budget – are there areas of expenditure that can be reduced or delayed without causing bigger problems further down the line? Speak to Synod officers for advice – don’t get into the position where choices are taken away because advice is not sought soon enough.

PART 3

What is the “New Normal” for your Church?

Do you still need a church building?



We have missed being able to meet together for worship, fellowship and service. Undoubtedly, a number of our members will have missed meeting together in the church building. But we have survived outside the building, albeit because we had to and at the expense of suspending a number of activities. Yet before we fall back into routine and habit, take some time to explore whether you still need a church building – or at least a building of the size or in the location that you currently have one. Would there be a freedom from letting go of the current buildings and meeting in community space (or even, for smaller churches, in somebody’s home)? Would being freed of the expense and complication of managing a building give new energy to engage in mission in the community? Would it just make the church a happier place? Would it mean that you could re-locate to somewhere that would make it easier to reach the people you want to reach? Is this the moment to ask the questions that seemed impossible before lockdown? This is a big decision that must not be rushed, but it might just be the right time to start a conversation on the subject amongst the Elders before bringing the Church Meeting into the conversation.

What might worship look like?



As noted in Part 2, nothing is yet known for certain, but it seems likely – and reasonable – that worship services will not look “normal” from the first Sunday after the lockdown phase ends. Prepare for the fact that a significant number of your congregation will still be vulnerable to serious illness if they become infected, and so should still be shielding themselves. A number of people that would normally be present and taking an active role may not be there. In response we can encourage, or press, others to take on those “jobs,” or we can seek to be more creative.

Whether or not you have reduced numbers physically able to meet together, this will be a good time to think about your worship content. Prepare for the fact that communal singing may still be banned or restricted – how will that effect the “diet” of worship that will be offered?

We know that even before coronavirus, numbers attending worship were steadily falling in almost all of our churches. We don’t assume that there was anything that you were doing that was putting people off, but might the opposite be true: if you do things differently, you might start to attract others who were not previously attending worship? Anecdotally, a number of Ministers have reported many people joining online worship services that would not or could not attend physically in the past. Might streaming our worship online be part of the “new normal”? The thought of buying and managing the technology might fill you with some trepidation. It is still better to do a few things and to do them well (see the Moderators’ report to General Assembly 2018 for more on this).

We might need to identify which things we should give up permanently – or at least for another season – in order to create space, time and energy to do new things, or to do some of our old things differently. There is a suggestion that the style of online worship during lockdown, which is much more about the minister and others talking to camera, is a very different experience to simply streaming our “standard” services with viewers/participants at a distance from the “action”. Might we then need to evolve two styles of service – one that might be recorded and then streamed (or distributed by other means such as DVDs or USB memory sticks), as well as the more recognisable worship offering? Many churches, pre-pandemic, had stopped their evening

service – might an online or recorded service come to take its place? Or should it be vice versa – if you are getting a larger congregation online, should your morning act of worship be that, and then physically gather in the afternoon or evening? Remember too that there is nothing that says our main act of worship must be on a Sunday (though many good reasons why this should also be retained as a day for worship.)

Be aware that Ministers and worship leaders will be expecting a significant number of memorial and thanksgiving services post-pandemic, as the restrictions placed on funerals meant that many were unable to grieve well or fully. They will need a good deal of time to prepare these well and lead them for an extended period, especially if restrictions on numbers, distancing and singing remain in place. Do not immediately re-fill diaries with the “same old” – keep plenty of time available for this vital aspect of ministry.

Many churches have climbed a steep learning curve on using technology in worship, both from the “provider’s” point of view and that of the participant. It would seem a shame to lose that newly gained ground. So how will your church continue in this rich vein? If we are now able to record (video or audio-only) our services, how will we share them? Some are using established hosting platforms (Church Online, YouTube, Facebook); some have provided some degree of interaction in online worship, for example through Zoom; some are putting recordings on their own web site or sharing them as podcasts. Others are sharing audio-recordings on USB memory sticks (which seems to be the normal distribution method for Talking Newspapers now). Others still are emailing transcripts of devotional material, or hand-delivering or posting printed matter to those who cannot access more technical routes. As they put in the extra effort to do this, more people are being included in our corporate devotional life – those who were “shut-ins” but still part of our established fellowships and those who are being reached for the first time. We are two decades into the 21st Century, and surely it is time for our devotional life to start to catch up, without losing the richness of our heritage?

Community Engagement



How did the restrictions affect your engagement with the community around us? What was the story for your buildings and was there a different story for the engagement of members with neighbours and those in need? What have you learned about the way you connect with people who didn’t come to your building or activities before the pandemic? What have you learned about the needs of those around your buildings or where you live? What can you do differently to express more fully God’s love in word and action?

Pastoral Care



One of the beneficial aspects of the lockdown was that intentional pastoral care increased almost everywhere. People were regularly in touch with others to ask how they were, whether or not they were doing so “officially” as Elders holding a pastoral care list. The situation we found ourselves thrust into meant that Ministers and others found they had time as well as the incentive to prioritise pastoral care. This begs two vital questions: firstly, how can we stop filling our diaries with the same old things to leave space for high quality continuing pastoral care? Secondly, how can we maintain momentum so that pastoral care properly belongs to the whole Body of Christ, not only to those who occupy certain offices?

There is no suggestion that we were doing the wrong things pre-pandemic, and certainly not that anyone was either under-working or shirking responsibility. Rather, as we start to plan for our “new normal”, the challenge is to identify things that we have recently stopped doing so that we can engage in pastoral care at (or even above) the lockdown levels. This might be done through

simply not re-starting some of the tasks that took so much time previously, or it might be through finding others to share the burden of those activities that are resuming, and also to share in the ministry of pastoral care.

If (as in many places) pastoral care previously, “didn’t count unless it was the Minister,” is there now a greater openness to receiving care from a variety of others? How will you communicate to the church that pastoral care matters but that it is a whole-Body responsibility? Should this be for the Minister’s pastoral letter in a monthly magazine, through a more personal letter, through teaching and preaching in church, or (almost certainly) a mixture of this and other means? What matters now is how to re-shape our churches, to re-set expectations, and to live in the way that we intend to live, all in a sustainable manner. What we don’t need (with very few exceptions) is Ministers working harder: most do too much and more than they ought. We need a balance in our ministries that will last beyond a few weeks or months of post-pandemic recovery.

Meetings



Another positive outcome of the lockdown has been the improvements in our environment as traffic has reduced dramatically. With hindsight, will we see this just as a blip – an interruption to business as normal that we are longing to get past? Or might we find ways to tread more lightly on God’s earth? Zoom and other video-conferencing platforms surely cannot replace face-to-face meetings forever. The non-verbal clues are often missing and the free-flow exchange of ideas is more difficult in online encounters. As so many have learned how to meet online, though, we should be looking for opportunities to avoid the greenhouse gas emissions and congestion of physical travel, as well as the costliness in time. In terms of good governance, if we want to use video conferencing in the councils of our church then we must ensure that all participants can see and hear each other. The challenge of holding a Church Meeting by Zoom, for example, is therefore immediately obvious. But it may be possible to use technology to facilitate Elders’ meetings in some places, or committee and task groups. If a number of people are able to physically gather and some participants join the meeting, we can still make a measurable difference to our collective carbon footprint.

Alongside returning to physical meetings, there will be some conversations that can properly and helpfully take place through other means – phone calls and email, for instance, rather than returning to crowded agenda for our meetings. We need to be clear about how we will take decisions and about agreeing schemes of delegated authority – **and record what we agree** – but much business that doesn’t require decision-making can easily move to a different forum for discussion, reporting progress back to the councils of the church as necessary.

Managing external users



Many churches rely heavily on lettings income to balance their budget (or at least reduce their annual deficit!) Buildings held under the United Reformed Church Acts can use spare capacity in their buildings to let to outside organisations and individuals. However, we must remember that however community-focussed your church is, we are NOT in the “village hall business” – we do not keep church buildings simply to provide space for external organisations, however much we have come to rely on lettings income. Our buildings are places for the Church to gather for worship and discipleship and as tools for mission. It is NOT Christian mission to let space to a slimming club or animal charity jumble sale with no interaction other than collecting the “rent”; it MAY be mission if there is some value added by the church through Christian hospitality (thus showing love in action other than through being “landlord”), through befriending group leaders and members, or genuinely being in partnership with the letting organisation in serving the neighbourhood.

Where does the balance lie for your church? Does this re-set/resumption moment provide an opportunity to do things differently and intentionally make your lettings about mission? We know that many user groups have been invited to church events and ignored or declined the invitation in the past. We cannot assume that the old order applies any longer. We can find ways to do things differently. It obviously takes a regular commitment for a church member to open doors to let tenants in, but it does provide better security rather than issuing keys to outside bodies, as well as giving opportunities to strengthen relationships, develop communication and build community. If that isn't the right way forwards for your church, is there something you can do to improve the welcome that user groups experience, rather than cold rooms and a set of colder notices about stacking chairs, turning lights off and leaving the room clean?

How will you support and value the groups coming into your building, rather than simply collecting money from them? You might even have church members that would like to join the user groups for exercise, education or friendship – when was the last time that was discussed in your church meeting or notice sheet?

Recognising the financial dependence on letting income, are there user groups that have been problematic and for whom this provides an opportunity to end or re-negotiate their use? Have you got an up-to-date written agreement, with clear terms and conditions of use for every user group? Do not simply re-admit all previous users into the building without checking with the Synod Office for an appropriate standardised form of agreement that give the local church and the trustees of the building an appropriate level of protection. Are there issues of physical security and safeguarding that need to be reviewed and updated? Do the user groups carry their own public liability as they should? Do they operate their own health and safety policy, or are they aware of, and compliant with, the church's policies? Our new normal must be built around doing things well. That does not mean that we submerge ourselves in an avalanche of bureaucracy. It does mean that we do all things to the glory of God, and that means cutting corners must not be part of our new way of working.

Conclusion

We would be most unwise to look to get back to “how we always do things.” This is, we pray, a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do things better. Some things, like meeting together, we will be glad to do after the Covid-19 lockdown is lifted, but let us be wise as to when and how and for what purposes we start to meet together again.

There are some things that we should be glad that we don't have to start again, or at least start them again the way that we used to do things – things that, “we've always done this way,” when nobody really remembers or understands why. The particular areas for which this applies will depend on your local context and according to your local means.

**Getting on with this conversation and discernment should be a priority.
If you rush back to the, “old ways,” you could miss the single opportunity
to find a new way of doing things.**

For other matters, more careful reflection and careful planning will be needed, but this is the right time to start the conversation, rather than unassumingly continuing as you were.

Your Synod officers will be glad to be involved in these discussions with you, and if it would help to seek external facilitators to help the discussion move forwards.

We can have a new vision of what we want our churches to be like – what they might become rather than what they have been. There are so many things that we have been doing that were and are the right things, and we don't need to throw them away. But nothing should unthinkingly be carried forwards.

The world has changed. It cannot go back to how it was, and in many, many ways, neither should it seek so to do.

‘We worship God, ever present in the Holy Spirit; who brings this Gospel to fruition, assures us of forgiveness, strengthens us to do God’s will, and makes us sisters and brothers of Jesus, sons and daughters of God.’

The United Reformed Church Basis of Union

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