

EMURCE No: 314 – 2nd April 2020
WEEKLY EDITION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
EDITED THIS WEEK BY: MARK HODGSON

Dear Everyone

There seems to be a split between folk, some of whom have had to lock down so much that the future diary looks rather empty, compared with others who are working furiously hard to keep things moving. I think of the people trying to find beds, equipment and staff for the new Nightingale Hospitals in the three centres across the country versus those who have had to self-isolate for whatever reason and, used to a range of weekly social events and meetings, are staying at home with little human contact.

The in-vogue phrase is “to obey social distancing” but that is the worst thing we can do at this time. Now, I am not advocating that we break the government guidance, but we should never distance ourselves socially from our friends because that simply leads to increased isolation which can drastically affect our mental well-being. We should, however, distance ourselves physically while promoting our social interaction, using tools like the telephone or the internet to keep in touch with each other.

It is at times like these that my heart is warmed by the stories of care, help and loving contact being made by people of all faiths and none – all contributing in building a society of love and care – God’s Kingdom of love. These good news stories far outweigh the tales of silly over buying and unthinking crowding that often feature in the bad news on the news. Local neighbourhoods are clubbing together to buy bits and pieces for each other, young people are offering to shop for their elderly neighbours, Churches are being creative over the way services can be broadcast to their flock to maintain a little sense of normality in all this strangeness. Even just saying hello at a safe distance over the garden fence is so moving and powerful, and yet so simple. After the divisiveness of the debate over Europe and the parliamentary election, we seem to be pulling together to care for one another amidst the invisible foe of a tiny virus. I hope and trust that this feeling remains with us all after the threat.

We were out doing a survey today – it was essential as pieces of masonry have been falling off the church building close to the pavement so we needed to check the stability of all other parts. Pinned to the noticeboard alongside the announcement that, though the church building might be closed, they were still caring, was this prayer.

We are not people of fear,

we are people of courage.

We are not people who protect our own safety,

we are people who protect our neighbour’s safety.

We are not people of greed,

we are people of generosity.

We are your people, God,

giving and loving,

whoever we are,

whatever it costs,

wherever you call us,

for as long as it takes.

Amen.

THE URC WEBSITE - ADVICE TO CHURCHES ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

<https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/3365-urc-issues-coronavirus-advice-to-its-churches>

The URC website is updated daily with advice and resources from a variety of sources. Many of the questions and concerns of local churches are addressed, along with some uplifting and encouraging articles and prayers. We feature a few items here.

What can churches do under lockdown? A summary of government guidance.

Funerals: the congregation of immediate family with a carer, if required, or a friend if no family members are attending. Two metres to be maintained between every household group;

A minister of religion is permitted to go to their place of worship to broadcast an act of worship to people outside the place of worship, whether over the internet or otherwise;

For the purpose of hosting essential voluntary or public service, such as food banks, homeless services, and blood donation sessions.

Churches with paid employees

Does your church have any paid staff, for example a caretaker or administrator, and their work has stopped because your premises are closed? The URC Treasurers and Chief Finance Officers have provided important advice on the recently announced 'Job Retention Scheme' which churches are able to access. You can find their guidance letter addresses to Church Treasurers and Secretaries on the URC website.

https://urc.org.uk/images/Letter_to_Churches_re_Furloughed_Workers.pdf

LEAFLET ABOUT PRAYER FOR CHILDREN

Revd Jenny Mills, a minister in East Midlands Synod, has written a lovely leaflet full of ideas for children's prayers - and easy to use by adults too. Try it, especially when you are feeling scared, anxious or sad.

Sit and watch a spider or other creature or look carefully at something God has created. Observe the beauty and detail. This is a prayer!

Dance, sing, laugh! On your own or with others. To music or not. Be aware of your body and how it feels and works. This is a prayer!

As you eat or drink be aware of where your food has come from and how fortunate you are to have it. Maybe think about those who do not have as much. This is a prayer!

Stand still and look at the sky. Listen and look. Feel the wind, sun, warmth or cold. Spin round and experience how it feels. This is a prayer!

To download the full leaflet visit: https://urc.org.uk/images/Pamphlet_for_prayer-trifold.pdf

PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE COUNCIL FOR WORLD MISSION, REVD DR COLLIN COWAN

As we retreat into our own homes, we are called to remember that the virus is no respecter of borders and our fellow Christians throughout the world are facing the same issues. Revd Colin Cowan, General Secretary of the Council for World Mission, has written a Pastoral Letter to the member churches. He writes:

The world as we knew it has changed; and the need to adapt to this rapidly changing situation is not only urgent; it is fraught with challenges. As months pass and the end seems still out of sight, to our natural eyes, it is quite understandable if fear and insecurity set in. And yet, we can be encouraged by the inspiring ways in which individuals and communities are rising in response to this crisis. There are opportunities for engagement that are emerging for the church in this time of great turmoil and isolation. In this our hour of brokenness and great need, as people of faith, we are called to persist in prayer, trusting in God's unconditional love and abundant grace for all.

The full letter can be found on the URC website:

<https://urc.org.uk/images/200328-CWM-pastoral-letter-regarding-COVID-19.pdf>

WALKING THE WAY

The URC's focus on whole-of-life discipleship, Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today is all about recognising and responding to the presence of God in our everyday reality.

But what happens when that reality is upended, as we are experiencing right now? Can we experience God's presence in new ways? How do we live out our discipleship in such fearful and uncertain times - and what role does our own vulnerability play?

Published by Walking the Way this week, Continuing to Support Each Other addresses these questions and more, with practical advice and suggestion for tailoring our mission as disciples to the times in which we find ourselves. A helpful and inspiring booklet, Continuing to Support Each Other can be found at <https://bit.ly/3awOLYX>

WORSHIPPING TOGETHER, APART

It is truly inspiring to see the many ways URC ministers and members in the East Midlands have responded to the challenges of worshipping God during a lockdown, with almost as many solutions as there are churches. From shared **prayer sheets** to **pre-recorded services** and even **live telerooms**, the approaches are myriad. Here are just a few examples.

WORSHIP DIRECT TO HOMES

Even during the shutdown, continuing in fellowship does not have to involve the cutting edge of technology. Ministers, elders and leadership teams have widely turned to phone and email to reach out to members, particularly those who may be most feeling the effects of isolation.

In the **South Leicestershire Group** of churches, the Revd Richard Eastman has circulated a Bible reading plan compiled from the Revised Common Lectionary. At **Gainsborough URC**, the Revd Gillian Poucher has sent out reflections for Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter Monday and also reports an upsurge in requests to receive the weekly Prayer Chain email.

Similarly, several churches are using email or Royal Mail to share a weekly service sheet, so that members can conduct worship in their own homes. These include the **South Lincolnshire Group**, **Sutton in Ashfield URC**, **Christchurch LEP**, **Grantham** and **Stamford URC**. The latter, for example, can be found at <https://www.stamfordurc.org.uk/sundayworship.htm>

RECORDED SERVICES AND MORE

Stamford URC's weekly service is backed up by a podcast, recorded by the Revd Peter Stevenson and available via the same link. At the **Riverside Church, Sleaford**, too, the Revd Robert Bushby offers worship as a podcast which, along with daily prayers and reflections, can be played on its website:

<https://www.riversidesleaford.org.uk/index.php/worship/podcast-audio?jij=1585706745346>. In the **Derby West** pastorate, the Revd Judith Tatton-Schiff has sent out Sunday services in advance as an audio file, emailed to church members or posted on CD for those who prefer to receive it that way, and broadcasts via Facebook Live each Sunday at 10.45am and 3.45pm: <https://www.facebook.com/DerbyCentralURC/>

Other churches have turned to video recording to prepare a service which can be viewed at regular worship times. One such is **St Andrew's with Castle Gate URC, Nottingham**, whose services remain available to watch on its YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzIVuJnykyPfZPuNWzrUYIA>) or website: <https://standrewswithcastlegate.org.uk/worship/recordings/>

Just like the new Sunday service offered through the URC's **Daily Devotions**, such recorded worship can be shared by anyone with internet access, at a time of their own choosing.

However, services are not the only way to use YouTube, as **URC Newport Pagnell** demonstrates: its channel includes not only Sunday worship but **Toddler Praise** with storytelling, both conducted by the Revd Jenny Mills: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJgyPTQUXZ_OFtFI7KfPFXQ

A number of churches have also made use of **video conferencing** facilities (such as Zoom and WhatsApp) so that members can meet online to maintain regular meetings, pray, or simply share a chat with familiar faces.

SETTING UP A TELEROOM

Meanwhile **St Stephen's URC, Leicester** has made innovative use of a "teleroom" model, allowing up to 50 phones to be connected at the same time so everyone can take part in a live act of worship led by the Revd Lynn Fowkes. The same system is used for twice-weekly sessions of prayer and conversation, with daily reflections and services planned for Holy Week.

This approach may appeal to congregations who do not have widespread access to technology. As long as one or two people are able to invest some time and thought in setting the tele-room up, other members need only dial a phone number to join in – and an ordinary landline will do. It is fully interactive, with the voices of everyone on the call audibly shared in hymn singing or responsive prayer, while the audio-only format raises none of the safeguarding concerns that may arise when broadcasting live video from private homes.

Edited recordings of previous services can be heard on the St Stephen' Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/StStephensURC/>

We can help

If this or any of the other approaches above may help in your church, we will gladly arrange appropriate training or sharing of expertise: in the first instance, please email Derek Graham (Training & Development Officer) via training@urc5.org.uk

There is no one solution that will fit every congregation and those listed here are just a few examples. Whether your church has adopted any of these, has taken a different approach again or is still exploring the options, we would love to share your story in future posts.

Please email training@urc5.org.uk to let us know how your own church has responded to the prohibition of public gatherings currently forced upon us Covid-19.

SAFEGUARDING AND DBS CHECKS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Our current situation makes new demands of every church in terms of safeguarding: to uphold everyone's wellbeing, but also to ensure the care of those who may be particularly vulnerable. The safeguarding team at Church House has published a useful summary of advice, covering home visits, children and young people, adults at risk, guarding against fraud and sources of specific advice. It is available at

<https://urc.org.uk/images/Communications/docs/safeguarding-people-in-the-mid-st-of-coronavirus.pdf>

Provision has also been made so that DBS or PVG checks can continue to be conducted during the Covid-19 crisis.

The government has temporarily relaxed requirements for ID documents to be inspected in person: see

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/covid-19-changes-to-dbs-id-checking-guide>

DDC, which provides checking services to the United Reformed Church, has answered common queries on its website: <https://www.ddc.uk.net/company/ddc-response-to-covid-19-outbreak/>

THOUGHTS FOR MINISTERS

Amongst the wealth of resources shared on the URC's website in response to the coronavirus crisis is a short letter from Christopher Southgate, Carla Grosch-Miller and Hilary Ison, arising from the work of the Tragedies and Christian Congregations Project.

This is a recommended read for anyone ministering to congregations during this time, offering both an understanding about how responses to our current trauma are likely to evolve and sound advice about attending to our own well-being. It can be read at:

[https://urc.org.uk/images/Communications/docs/Thoughts_for_ministers_250320.](https://urc.org.uk/images/Communications/docs/Thoughts_for_ministers_250320.pdf)

pdf

A THOUGHT FOR THE PRESENT MOMENT

None of us would have chosen to have solitude and separation forced upon us, as coronavirus has done. Yet, without for a moment forgetting its victims or those who care for them, it is possible to approach these strange days as an opportunity for spiritual restoration. Revd Derek Hopkins has kindly allowed us to share the reflection he has written, "Thought for our moment" which you can download here:

<https://www.urc5.org.uk/content/thought-present-moment>

DEPTHS AND HEIGHTS - REFLECTIONS FOR HOLY WEEK

Not sure how to mark Holy Week without attending church? Bulwell URC has published Depths and Heights, a collection of meditations and prayers for each day from the eve of Palm Sunday through to the eve of Easter Sunday. It explores the words of the hymn "When I survey the wondrous cross" by Isaac Watts, as a means of approaching the crucifixion and its intermingling of utmost sorrow and utmost love.

The work of a church member at Bulwell URC, Depths and Heights is shared by kind permission for you to use as you may wish in your devotions for Holy Week. To download please visit:

<https://www.urc5.org.uk/content/church-depths-and-heights>

MESSAGE FROM ROBERT WHITE



Life is full of surprises, and recently I received a most amazing one, which I found quite overwhelming. Thank you all so very much for this kindness and generosity, and for your support and encouragement over the years. We have been on a long journey together and you may wonder how it all started. In 1999, I was a Partner in a firm of Nottingham Solicitors and one lunchtime, I was walking into the City centre, when I felt a severe chest pain. After few moments, I continued my walk and thought nothing further about it. A few days later, I woke up in the night with a similar pain and my wife asked me if I had had such a pain previously. I said that I had, and she stressed that I must visit our GP the following day, which I did. I was immediately admitted to Hospital and a few days later had a heart bypass operation. After three months at home, I returned to my office when my two Partners and I decided that the practice was becoming vulnerable, so we sought a merger with another similar firm. I remained a Partner in the merged practice but said that I would work only four days a week, then three and then two before retiring completely. The arrangement worked well initially, but later I felt that my Clients expected me to be in the office full time, which I was not prepared to do, so I retired from the partnership and gave up my Practising Certificate.

I was enjoying my retirement, when one evening, I read the following advertisement in the local Nottingham newspaper - "East Midlands Synod, The United Reformed Church based at Sherwood require the services of a part time Trust and Property Officer". I knew members of the URC Church in our village and when in practice I had acted for several members of St Andrew's with Castle Gate URC. I decided after a few days to apply and was called for an Interview. The then Moderator, Terry Oakley, handed to me a list of legal questions and asked me to answer them which I did. I was then asked further questions by the Interview Panel, before having a general chat. I returned home thinking that I had a very pleasant morning. In the afternoon I received a telephone call from Irene Wren, the then Synod Clerk when she said, "If we offered you the job, would you accept?" I was so taken aback that I muttered "Yes", and so began our journey together.

Before I arrived in the office, I decided to look through the Act of Uniformity 1662, and I read about the Great Ejection and the Five Mile Act – subjects which I am sure Ministers will have studied at College. As we have journeyed along, we have climbed high mountains, but have always reached the summit and got down safely. We have paddled through deep waters but have always reached the bank on the other side. Throughout I have made some very good friends and acquaintances, and I will miss you all far, far more than you could ever possibly imagine. My wife has often told me that I was happier and more relaxed in the Synod office than I ever was in practice, and I wholeheartedly agree with her. I have seen Moderators come and go. I have seen Training and Development Officers come and go. I have seen Ministers come and go, but the body of Synod remains constant, as I am sure it always will and I still recognise today people who I met at the first Synod that I attended in March 2004. You now have a new Moderator to be inducted at a later date, and you have a recently appointed Training and Development Officer and Property Officer. I hope that you will give to them the same support that you have given to me over the last sixteen years. My very personal thanks are to the wonderful Office team for their friendship, loyalty and for all the times that they have come to my aid on the computer. They have certainly improved my skills in that regard!

Now as we go on our separate pathways along this wonderful journey of life, I trust and pray that Almighty God in his infinite power and wisdom will continue to uphold you all in his everlasting arms and that he will be with you, guide you, protect you and sustain you in these difficult days and always. Thank you again so very, very much for your kindness, your generosity and your friendship over the last sixteen years. I have enjoyed immensely my time in the Synod office, and I will miss you all.

Robert

FAREWELL SERVICE - REVD DAVID LEGGE & TRICIA

Due to the outbreak of Coronavirus (Covid - 19), it is with deep sadness that we have decided to postpone the farewell Service for Revd David Legge and Tricia, planned for Saturday 25th April 2020. We plan to hold an event sometime in the future and will be in touch about this in due course. In the meantime, please remember David and Tricia in your prayers as they retire.

YOUTH AND CHILDREN'S EVENTS POSTPONED

Please note that until further notice all Synod Y&C events previously advertised in the 'Development Opportunities Booklet' up until the end of June have been postponed due to the corona virus pandemic. These events include all Safeguarding Training and the Mental Health Training which was scheduled to take place on 4th April.

EAST MIDLANDS SYNOD OFFICE CLOSURE

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the Synod Office closed on 24th March and will remain closed until further notice as we follow Government guidelines. Whilst we are closed all members of staff will be working from home. If you wish to contact them please e-mail in the usual way. For the list of emails click on the link below:

<https://www.urch5.org.uk/synodstaff>

Telephone calls will now be forwarded to mobiles so please call the office in the usual way on 0115 9609241 between the hours of 9am - 3pm, Monday - Thursday, if you wish to speak to a member of staff.

Due to the office closure, at this time we have no access to the database for sending out group emails. Therefore all information will be put on to our website. Please keep checking for updates. All other information will be sent out using our E-Letter provider so if you have not already signed up, please click on this link:

<https://urch5.us18.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=7b9491ce2216f1835e4829f87&...>

Our E-Letter will be sent out weekly for the time being, to help keep you updated and keep in touch, so if you have any information, news, good news stories, etc please send to training@urch5.org.uk

AND FINALLY: - This E letter is sent on behalf of The URC East Midlands Synod, 1 Edwards Lane, Sherwood, Nottingham, NG5 3AA. Telephone: 0115 9609241

Email address for E-Letter Editor: trainingpa@urch5.org.uk

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