



REEPHAM & WENSUM VALLEY
TEAM CHURCHES

Notes from Zoom Open Benefice Meeting: Thursday 18th June 2020

Representatives from across the benefice joined Rev'd Helen and Rev'd Keith for a meeting to discuss reopening our church buildings. We were joined by the Venerable Ian Bentley, Archdeacon of Lynn.

Rev'd Keith and Rev'd Helen welcomed those present and thanked them for joining the meeting.

An overview from The Archdeacon, Ian Bentley

The Archdeacon provided an overview of the last three months. He said that he had seen some amazing things across the Diocese as we have moved to find ways to continue to worship together. The buildings may be closed but the church is very much alive online across Zoom, Youtube and within our communities. In place of time spent in meetings, clergy have been able to provide more pastoral care and attend to the needs of their parishioners and get back to the base of their calling. Communities have come together to look out for one another, feed the hungry and care for those in need; what the church has always done.

Closing the church buildings has given us some challenges. Vital income from services and church visitors has decreased which has resulted in a drop in parish share contributions. If the current trend continues, the Diocese will be adrift by £3million. A loan has been sought to pay stipends, which will need to be paid back slowly over the next few years. Currently 48% of staff at Diocesan House are on furlough, the financial picture is bleak.

Reopening our buildings – Slowly, Steadily, Safely

The announcement to reopen church for private prayer was given by the Prime Minister with little time for churches to prepare and plan fully. There have been many questions from churchwardens and the clergy alike regarding the safety, practicality and procedures of reopening our buildings. Rt Rev Graham Usher, Bishop of Norwich, has said we need to reopen our churches “slowly, steadily and safely” with tremendous thought and care. We need to take a sensible, church by church approach to opening. This may mean that some parish churches are not open for some time yet.

The next likely announcement will be outdoor public worship, followed by indoor private worship, but we do have to wait for the Government to announce this legislation. Whilst it can seem that a small rural church in Norfolk with a small congregation does not pose the same Covid risk as a larger more frequently building such as the Cathedral or mosques and synagogues in the city, we need to be patient and wait. Reopening of religious buildings needs to be fair to everyone and all religions and the legislation applies to all of us irrespective of congregation size.

It is possible that reopening to public worship may happen at the end of July or in August, but what ever happens it will need to be done slowly, steadily and safely. We won't be able to return to our previous rota as many of our retired clergy are 70+ or shielding. It would not be right to make people feel obliged to take services as they have been put on the rota. Therefore, it is likely that we would start with a weekly benefice service for everyone to attend.

The service rota and the amount of buildings we had to maintain before lockdown was not sustainable. We knew these issues were coming within the next 5-10 years, but lockdown has focused our attention and given us the space and time to look at how we can address them and make things more sustainable going forward. We have found new ways of “being church” and some of these can continue.

Our return to open churches for public worship will be a gradual process. Many members of our congregations will not be able to return for some time due to health concerns, self isolation and shielding or just feeling wary. There will be a longish buffering time, the return to church will be gradual.

Funerals and Weddings

Currently funerals are permitted inside church buildings. The number of people attending will be dependent on the size of the building and current social distancing guidelines. We are waiting to hear when weddings will be permitted and the number of attendees, this has legal implications and we need to have Government consent.

Preparing to Reopen

Rev'd Keith thanked the Archdeacon for his introduction and overview of the past three months. Rachel Richmond, Ron Luton-Brown and Sue Cripps have been working on getting St Mary's in Reepham ready to reopen. Rev'd Keith invited Rachel to talk about what the reopening process had entailed.

Following guidelines, St Mary's has been deep cleaned by R-LB. All the pews, apart from two rows at the front and one at the back have been roped off. Signage has been produced to ensure visitors abide by the current social distancing rules and follow the one-way system that has been put in place. There is a table outside the main door with hand sanitiser for visitors to use as they enter and leave the building. Items and excess furniture have been removed to lessen the likelihood of contact transmission and to aid future cleaning. The prayer tree has been moved to the nave and candles have been replaced by pieces of ribbon for visitors to use to remember loved ones.

The whole process has taken two weeks, however, there have been at least two versions of the risk assessment to complete as guidance changes. The risk assessment needs to be signed off by PCC members before the church can reopen. To begin with, St Mary's will reopen for 2 days a week for private prayer. This will also allow other churches to learn best practice before opening their own buildings.

Must every church open?

Rev'd Keith added that reopening the building is not as easy as just opening a door. There is no pressure, certainly not from Rev'd Helen and Rev'd Keith to reopen our churches. If PCCs want to watch and wait to see what happens at St Mary's that is fine. Rev'd Keith reiterated that there is no obligation for churches to reopen and certainly those who are in isolation or shielding must not put their health at risk. The health of our volunteers and congregations is far more important. Rev'd Helen agreed stating that all risk assessments should be carried out and considered by the PCC to see whether it was feasible to reopening the buildings.

Practicalities of reopening a church and organising PCC meetings

John Hurst asked if and how PCC meetings were happening. Meetings have not happened over the last months, however there is the possibility of having the meetings via Zoom or making decisions via email providing everyone is copied. The Archdeacon added that business can be conducted via email, providing it is minuted.

Helena asked about the possibility of closing certain areas of the church for 72 hours to reduce the need for deep cleaning. This is a possibility if the building is large enough. It is likely that when funerals take place that the building will be closed for 72 hours before being reopened for private prayer.

The question of whether prayer books would be available was raised. Some churches are printing paper copies which can be disposed of. There is the possibility of laminating prayer sheets which can be cleaned with bleach/detergent. There may be a designated area for "used" books/prayer sheets to go which can then be quarantined for 72 hours before returning to circulation.

Flowers in church was discussed and whether this counts as an act of private worship. The guidelines state that churches can only be used for private prayer and flower arranging is not necessarily an act of private prayer. However, the Archdeacon said that flower arrangements could be made at home and then taken into the church as this would reduce the amount of time that people are spending in the buildings.

How do we move forward out of lockdown?

Those present were split into groups to discuss the following questions:

1. What have we discovered during lockdown that we need to keep and develop?
2. What have we discovered that can be laid down?
3. What have we lost that we need to regain?
4. What have we lost that can remain lost?

1. What have we discovered during lockdown that we need to keep and develop?

- Maintain our online presence – possibility of online prayer groups and courses
- Being able to attend services when previously those who are housebound or have childcare issues are unable to.
- National attendance at church via virtual services has increased during lockdown.
- Online presence has given more contact with younger people, how can we maintain and develop this?
- Being able to “go to church” at any time of day and visit other benefices and welcome visitors from other parts of the UK/ world – greater flexibility
- Online meetings - particularly enticing to be able to meet in the comfort of your home rather than a cold church in January!
- The weekly subscribers email is a weekly invitation to church, makes people feel welcome.
- Being able to mix with others from across the benefice more frequently
- There are different ways of doing church – being able to experience different types of service
- More ways to access church leadership
- The clergy have more time and availability to spend with people rather than just being in contact on Sundays
- Keeping in touch with people more frequently via phone/skype/zoom
- Time to read, study, pray and reflect – availability of vast resources online
- The use of simpler services and images - possible use of screens in churches, expansion of more modern services.
- That the laity can be trusted and should be encouraged to more to assist their priest

2. What have we discovered that can be laid down?

- Isolation – lockdown has been very difficult for those on their own

3. What have we lost that we need to regain?

- Human contact -not seeing people in person or only from a distance and not being able to hug people has been difficult for many.
- Singing and music together
- Social interaction with children and families at school and messy church, although contact has been maintained via videos and Messy Church at home packs.
- Income from services, visitors, tours, concerts, lectures
- Community groups using our buildings such as Lunch Clubs, exercise classes, clubs, coffee mornings that also contribute to our finances as well as bringing the community together.
- Being together in one building as the body of Christ and the special atmosphere and sacredness they hold.
- Physical and sacred places for prayer
- Outdoor public worship
- Communion

4. What have we lost which can remain lost?

- APCMs
- Churchwardens having to be sworn in each year

- Having to dedicate time and money to maintain medieval buildings. What else could that money be spent on that would benefit our communities more? How can we be sustainable with less money?
- Service schedules which make it difficult for our ministers to work across the benefice. Do we need to look at which churches are used regularly, which churches remain open and how we can make a service rota which is sustainable and enjoyable for the clergy involved.
- Our dependence on buildings – we have shown that the church has remained strong and alive during lockdown.

Following the group discussions, those present returned to discuss any questions about reopening the churches.

Will the churches need to be manned when open?

It is a good idea to have people in the church to help visitors, but ONLY if they are not shielding or self isolating and are willing to do so. Contact sheets will be put in the church porches so visitors can sign in when they arrive.

How will we know when the churches are open?

Annabel can publish this on the website, Facebook and A Church Near You. It can also be put on the weekly email. It is a good idea for groups of churches to coordinate their opening so that the best provision is available for our communities. However, this is dependent on volunteers and the safety of reopening the churches. If it is not possible to do it safely, the church should remain closed.

Are there rules and signage available to churches?

Once we have trialled the reopening of St Mary's, Reepham we will have an idea of the signage needed and this will be available. Currently there is nothing available centrally from the CofE.

Are the sign in sheets used for Track & Trace?

Initially there was talk of these being used for Track & Trace but guidance has since changed. Those visiting do not need to leave their contact details, just their name and date. The sign in forms will be used to monitor the use of the buildings and cleaning requirements. If the building has had a large number of visitors, such as a funeral the building may need to be closed for 72 hours.

Can pews be used in rotation to allow "self cleaning"?

It depends on the size of the building. Some churches have asked people to take a hassock and place it on the seat they have used. This indicates the areas that need to be cleaned. Other churches have implemented a similar system using laminated pieces of paper with a red cross on them, which are then left in place so future visitors do not sit there. Some churches have specified certain pews to be used on certain days thus giving pews time to "rest" in between.

What about the people who visit our churches for historical reasons such as walkers, tourists etc?

The church is not open for tourism, it is only open for private prayer. We need to ensure that there is adequate signage relating to this. There are many churches who have made online videos showing what to expect when you are visiting their church. St Peter Mancroft and North Walsham have good examples.

Are the rules different for contractors?

Any queries regarding contractors should be discussed with Rev'd Helen and Rev'd Keith. Again, it is important that we keep the buildings, our volunteers and visitors safe.

AOB

Following the question and answer session, Rachel Richmond said she had received an email from the Safeguarding Team about fake emails and phone calls from people stating that they were calling from Track & Trace and that they had been in contact with someone who had tested positive for Covid-19 and would need to get tested. They then ask for payment and delivery details stating that the test costs £50.

All tests are free, therefore if anyone receives a call or email like this, please ignore it and do not give out your card or bank details. Annabel will circulate this via the website, Facebook and Enewsletter.

Rev'd Keith thanked everyone for their time and the Archdeacon closed with a blessing.