



March 17, 2020

To all Serving Ministers and Church Secretaries

Dear sisters and brothers, partners in the Gospel,

Guidance to Churches regarding the Coronavirus Outbreak

Clearly, we are in a rapidly changing and unprecedented scenario. All churches and their members are asked to heed the emerging government advice. The URC-specific guidance is being regularly updated – at the moment daily. It can be found at <https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/3365-urc-issues-coronavirus-advice-to-its-churches.html>, or follow the link from the URC home page.

In addition, further information will be posted on the Synod website at www.urcwestmidlands.org.uk/covid19.html

The key decision to be faced now is whether or not our churches should close for worship, business, social activities and lettings.

In a simple summary, it is for the Elders' Meeting (or equivalent in LEPs) to make that decision, but the clear, strong advice from the denomination and this Synod is that, yes, you should now suspend these gatherings indefinitely.

Please see the covid19 page linked above for further information and for the rationale for this advice.

Preaching engagements by Assembly Accredited and Synod Recognised Lay Preachers should be cancelled. For the avoidance of any doubt or confusion, **Pulpit Supply Secretaries are asked to confirm with preachers that they have booked that the church will not be meeting for worship.** This is in light not only of the age profile of our congregations, but also the age profile of a great many (by no means all, though!) of our Lay Preachers.

There is a greater need than ever for the church to be the church, though. Because we will not be meeting together, we must keep in touch for one another and show practical care as best we can. This is especially important for the more elderly and vulnerable members of our church community, many of whom were already burdened by loneliness.

The URC's daily devotions are commended for your use. As a new service, we will also be producing a weekly service that people can use in their own homes. It will be available in printed format and with an audio recording, with the aim that the first one will be available by Palm Sunday. Sign up at <https://devotions.urc.org.uk/> I recognise that many in our congregations will not be able to access online resources. Part of your care for them might well be to print copies and deliver them. You may also wish to produce devotional material locally.

Be aware of those who will need help with shopping bought for them, either because they are practising "social distancing" or because they are "self isolating."

Friends, whilst for a time we must give up meeting one another (compare Hebrews 10:25), we must still find ways to encourage one another.

I know there are many practical considerations that I have not touched on yet. I will write more on the Covid19 web page covering many of them.

For time being, the Synod Office will be CLOSED to visitors. Staff will mostly be working from home, in accordance with the government's advice. One member of staff will go each day to deal with post, and the messages left on the answering machine will be notified to Helen Cavaco who will relay your message so that we can respond to you as quickly as possible. All of the officers are contactable on email as usual.

In closing, let me urge you to do three things:

- 1) Love one another and encourage one another daily
- 2) Do not be bound by fear, but take sensible precautions to protect yourself and others. I heard a doctor on the radio saying that he prescribes "five portions of fun every day" along with fruit and vegetables!
- 3) Pray for each other and the world.

Please join me in putting that third point into practice immediately, using a prayer written by our Moderators of General Assembly, the Revd Nigel Uden & Mr Derek Estill:

'God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.'

Psalm 46:1, NRSV

As so much is re-shaped by Coronavirus Covid-19, let us pray with
people left unwell, beckoned by death or bereaved;
people providing professional health care and advice, looking after loved ones at home or working to create treatments and cures;
people shaping the response of nations and neighbourhoods, of commerce and industry, of service and voluntary organisations and of communities of faith;
people who are anxious or afraid, alone or isolated.

Living, loving God,
we praise you,
and through times of peril we lean into you,
for in Jesus Christ
you have trodden paths as difficult as ours,
revealing there a love that nothing defeats,
a love that bears us through.
Even as we strive to behave responsibly,
and to care reliably,
so we feel after you
that in these uncertain times we might trust you are with us,
our refuge and strength,
and our faith, hope and love might be renewed,
through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Every blessing to you and yours,



Steve Faber (Revd)
Synod Moderator