



Dear friends,

Many thanks to those of you who have written, emailed or chatted with me in the past couple of weeks, sharing your experiences of 'lock-down', and especially of being the people of God in this unusual time. There is an overwhelming sense that many people are feeling connected – to one another by phone, letter or internet; to the wider Church as they share worship through the printed word, TV or radio, or online; and to God, as there is more time to digest scripture, prayers, hymn words and reflections. Some people tell me about the time they spend with the worship materials which are being offered, and how they notice that they are able to focus better as they reflect alone or with just one or two others, rather than in a busy church, in a service which has a pace all of its own. They also say how important the natural world is to them at present. But they tell me how much they miss one another's physical presence...a shared cup of tea or coffee, a hug, singing together, talking things over face to face...the ways we engage with one another when we meet in person are so many and various...and we miss them.

These reflections may be telling us something about what we need to do as we emerge from our current situation. For many of us, maintaining space for personal devotion and study will be important. We have been reminded that time with God individually, and as a family, or with a small group we are close to, matters – an hour on a Sunday morning cannot offer all the worship, prayer and reflection time that we need in a week. But, ultimately, we also need to find the right ways of returning to gathered worship and conversation.

Emerging from 'lock-down' is so very much harder than entering it...we see this in every sphere of life. I recently encountered a comment which made sense for me of why this is so particularly hard for faith communities. The writer pointed out that many of the areas of life which are re-opening are '*transactional*' – offering the provision of goods and services. People say things like 'if zoos can reopen, then why not church buildings...?'. This author suggests that this is because church communities are by their very nature '*relational*' places, and the changes required in our practice and behaviour to make them safe in the present time are huge. I don't know about you, but it's not part of my usual practice to shake hands with, or hug, every member of the supermarket queue, to chat for ten minutes stood close to the person serving me in the pharmacy, to eat biscuits with strangers at the zoo, or to burst into song in the middle of Marks and Spencers. But these things are part of what I might sometimes expect to do with a gathered church community, and, for a time, I will have to learn not do these things, or to do them differently. That learning will take time, determination and preparation...and we may decide that we would rather continue to worship as we are for a while, than to make some of the changes necessary to gather soon.

We are also a community who have high regard for, and seek to offer particular care to, those who are most vulnerable. Lock-down has highlighted ways in which we may not have done that as well as we might in the recent past. In terms of worship, for example, I ask myself regularly why we have not always provided written worship material in an accessible format for those who cannot gather for worship, and why it is only now that we are really exploring the power of digital media...

And so, as we return to gathering we must both continue those things we have learned (or relearned) to do which widen access to local worship, and include and engage those newly exploring faith or church, and also think about what we need to

do to make our gathering again safe for as many as we can, and especially for the vulnerable in our communities.

For some, home is not a safe place for all kinds of reasons, and the reopening of premises will provide access to safe space which is sorely needed. On the other hand, many of our regular worshippers are in groups particularly vulnerable to Coronavirus and still being advised to carefully limit their social contact. What decisions will best support them in the coming months?

What we hear on the news that we 'may' do, is not necessarily what we 'should' do, or what we 'must' do. The dates the Government sets for when certain things are permitted will not necessarily be the dates on which we change our pattern in Methodism, or in this Circuit. What our risk assessments tell us we could just about manage may not be the wisest course of action.

Our decision-making must listen to the law, the associated instruction and guidance and the wisdom of others in our tradition, but also to our local context, and particularly to the needs of the vulnerable in our church and wider communities. We must listen to the ache of our hearts and the clarity of our minds...and we must hold all this honestly before God, in conversation with scripture and before one another. Remember the building blocks of theological reflection? Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience...

And we must be brave enough to make provisional decisions...ready to make changes as and when we recognise the need.

The staff team are working hard to begin this process, and to help us not to lose the learning of these months as we consider meeting again. There will be many conversations over the next few weeks, and also an opportunity for as many of you as possible to express your views – look out for a circuit survey, hopefully coming to you in the next few weeks and intended to help us reflect as we look towards regathering. Please do find the best way for you to make your voice heard...

Holy God
as we seek your way forward,
we recognise our apprehension,
even as we detect opportunity.
Help us to keep our eyes focussed on you.
We entrust our hopes and fears to you.
Remind us that you are God
of the past, the present and the future
we pray for this time of journeying...

Join us together as one body in Christ
Open our eyes to capture your vision
Unburden us of all that distorts your voice
Reassure us of your Spirit's presence and power
Nudge us gently forward that we might trust in you
Empower us to be the church you long us to be, for
Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, Amen.

(Revd Rach, originally written for the West Leeds Community Church)

Peace, Jo