

Jesus said, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." ³¹... "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these."

Dear Friends,

Many people have spent a lot of time and energy doing risk-assessments and completing building re-opening checklists in order to get our church buildings Covid-secure and ready to use. Thank you to everyone who has been involved in that process and particular thanks go to Rev Roy Burley who has overseen the whole project for the Circuit. I know that many people who have attended worship in these buildings over recent weeks have been grateful.

I am writing to you now as we have reached a new stage in the pandemic. Unfortunately, the number of cases both nationally and locally is on the rise and becoming ever more concerning, as is the number of people in hospital with Covid-19. Lancashire is of particular concern with a significantly high number of cases - according to the government, this area is labelled as '**Local COVID Alert Level High**'.

While the current government guidelines do allow us to open our buildings for worship, it is advised that we should not meet with people in public venues (including places of worship): "In the affected local areas, we also advise that you should not meet with people you do not live with, unless they're in your support bubble, in any public venue. Examples of public venues include pubs, bars, restaurants and cafes, **places of worship**, community centres, leisure and entertainment venues, or visitor attractions and parks." *from NHS Covid-19 App.*

Every encounter that we have with other people, and every building that we visit, is a risk and it is clear that we should minimise the risks that we take for our own health, the health of others (particularly the elderly and more vulnerable members of our community) and also in order to reduce the pressure on the NHS. We should therefore avoid face-to-face encounters as much as possible and minimise the different places that we go to.

This situation has led me to the decision that we will no longer provide Local Preachers or Ministers to lead worship held in a church building for the present time - this is to protect all of our Preachers and Ministers.

My recommendation to every church in our Circuit is that we suspend worship in our church buildings and return to alternative forms of worship - Zoom-based, printed sheets, TV, radio, youtube etc. I also recommend that any midweek groups (Bible study, fellowship meetings, housegroups, prayer meetings) should also cease to meet face-to-face.

As a Circuit, we are planning to provide two Zoom-based services each Sunday - one seeking to serve those in our northern, Lune Valley and coastal parts of the Circuit and one serving Lancaster and the churches to the south of Lancaster - but anyone is welcome to attend either. We are also planning that the written 'Worship from Home' service sheets will be available to anyone who would like them. I recommend that you display a poster (similar to the one attached) at your church building to communicate effectively with your local community.

Some good news... Our new Circuit Administrator - Jo Towers - started work on 2nd October, she works in the mornings Mon-Fri. Having started work at The Cornerstone, we are now planning that she will be working from home from later this week. If anyone wants to receive the Zoom login information or the weblink for the 'Worship from Home' sheets then they should contact Jo - circuit@northlancsmethodist.org.uk

If a local church makes the decision that they will continue to meet for worship in the building, they will be responsible for leading their own act of worship (as a Local Arrangement) and they must continue to ensure that all Covid-secure procedures and policies are followed meticulously and 'Test & Trace' records are kept. The Church Council (as Trustees) remain responsible for the health and safety of all those who enter the building for any activity (including worship).

Today, I have also received communication from Lancashire Resilience Forum (*see additional sheet*) - The information from LRF makes it clear that external gatherings are **prohibited**, which means that sadly we cannot hold worship outside either (therefore outdoor Remembrance Day Services and outdoor Carol Services are prohibited).

Please continue to care for and support one another, to pray for one another and for the wider community and the world. Please also reach out in love to the most vulnerable in your neighbourhood.

Grace and peace,

Steve

Rev Steve Charman
Superintendent Minister (North Lancashire Methodist Circuit)