



The Diocese of Southwark

6 May 2020

The Bishop of Southwark

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To the Clergy of the Diocese of Southwark

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

During Eastertide I have had a powerful image before me of the Risen Christ bearing in his body the wounds of the Passion. This year we have been mindful that our Easter Faith, which we are called to proclaim, holds suffering and joy together, something very evident as our Diocesan Family has journeyed through these past weeks. The Coronavirus has taken a heavy toll in the Metropolis, including one of our longest serving parish priests. Moreover, we have been reminded that our lives are bound together interdependently across the nations of the globe with our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe having to endure an even more severe lockdown, recently extended, than has been our experience in the United Kingdom.

The Apostle Paul reminded the Church in Rome that: 'suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.' (Romans 5. 3-5)

As we hold onto hope I want to express my deep gratitude for the skill, energy and imagination with which so many in the Diocese, Lay and Ordained, have responded to the unprecedented challenges we have faced in the past two months. Great solidarity has been shown with the NHS in a concerted effort in which we have all participated to save lives underscored but the compellingly simple message: Stay at Home - protect the NHS - Save Lives. Additionally, there has also been a great flourishing of new ways to express the eternal truths by which we are called to live. We have all learnt lessons that will be of lasting value, working together to proclaim the Gospel with great joy and to serve our parish communities with love and devotion, the Lord being our helper. Many small acts of kindness to neighbours who may be vulnerable or isolated as well as larger scale coordinated responses to a wide range of deprivations from food poverty to homelessness have been heart-warming to see.

During these weeks the whole Church of England, with remarkably few exceptions, has followed the guidance that our Church buildings should remain closed to all, including to clergy. I have been immensely grateful for the way we have adhered to this guidance, journeying together in this Diocese. A number of Priests in Southwark have expressed their strong and well-reasoned objections to this policy but, when I have set out my reasons for wishing them to continue to do so, have kept to the guidance. This has called for forbearance and I express my gratitude and that of my Episcopal team. We are called to unity, and unity is costly.

The Government has said it will announce on Sunday (10 May) measures informed by the best scientific advice to ease restrictions progressively. The time has now come to move forwards and I am glad that the House of Bishops meeting on Tuesday (5 May) agreed to adopt a staged approach to Recovery. **I would like Clergy colleagues to know that should you now wish to stream or pre-record services from within our Churches you will have my support in doing so.** What has been happening in the home can now, with my permission, be done from the Church building. If an additional person is needed to provide technological and/or musical support etc, this should be accommodated only in a way that does not increase the risk of infection and observing social distancing.

There is, of course, no obligation to do this immediately and there may indeed be very good reasons for not doing so at once. There should be careful planning and proper consideration given to all aspects of returning to the church building. Please do not rush things or abandon existing plans for streaming etc as it is important to continue to offer pastoral care and support to the online communities which have been growing. I know, for example, that the Cathedral is likely to want to plan for this to happen from Ascension Day. I am not necessarily expecting uniformity of practice in this matter; but please know of my confidence in the decisions you will want to make in consultation with your partners in the Gospel. Like everyone else, we are having to live with uncertainty, and we do not know for certain when or how we will return to more familiar patterns of worship. We may have to live with different rules of engagement for a long time to come which will shape daily life, including church life, profoundly. This will work for good if we take hold intentionally of some of the new ways that the pandemic has led us to explore.

I also look forward to further stages of Recovery with steps to permit churches to be open for private prayer and in due time regulated once again for carefully regulated public worship. I will write again when I am able to say more on that subject. **For the time being however our churches must remain closed for the purposes of these further stages until such time as current restrictions and regulations have been modified or lifted.**

I am confident that Clergy will exercise wise judgment and I pray for a further fruitful flourishing of prayer, worship and ministry in Southwark. Let us uphold each other in prayer, with special intention for the victims of the Coronavirus and heartfelt thanksgiving for our hospital and prison chaplains as well as other key workers and those on the front line of service to the community.

With my prayers and appreciation as we continue to celebrate our Easter Faith in Christ our Saviour, Risen, Ascended and Glorified.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher Southwark". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Rt Revd Christopher Chessun
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