



THE CUMBRIA DISTRICT OF THE METHODIST CHURCH

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Dear Friends,

The closing for worship of Methodist churches in the Cumbria District during lockdown

Many of you will know that since the first lockdown the Superintendent ministers and then all the ministers with pastoral responsibilities in our Circuits have met regularly to consider how best to respond to the pandemic. This week we decided that I should write on behalf of us all to recommend that during lockdown all Methodist churches in the District should generally be closed for public worship. (There are separate provisions applying for pastoral offices such as funerals, and the Government guidelines do not currently permit opening for private prayer; so here we are talking about gathering for general worship.)

In the Spring lockdown, Government guidance indicated that churches should generally be closed, but present guidelines have allowed them to remain open (subject to restrictions). In this scenario, ultimately it is not for the Methodist Church as a whole, nor for the District or Circuits to make the final decision, but rather for the local trustees to determine whether their church should be open for worship or not (formally this might require a meeting of the church council, but between meetings appropriate decisions can sometimes be made by church stewards). Notwithstanding this, the wider Methodist Church has emphasised that no one should feel obliged to open for or to lead worship, a message which our denominational partners have similarly emphasised, and which as ministers we collectively endorse. Additionally, since superintendents have responsibility with others for making preaching plans, they have the ability to suspend plans, not least so that preachers are not obliged to take services.

We, the superintendents, ministers and I, all recognise that, even when a preaching plan has been suspended, the decision to open for worship is ultimately that of the local trustees, and this letter does not seek to suggest or presume otherwise. However, collectively we feel that it is unwise for any church to open for general public worship at this time, and we therefore recommend that all churches be closed.

We recommend this not with any joy but out of our responsibility as churches to help limit the spread of the virus; to help ensure that our congregations (and those opening up etc.) can be as safe as possible; and so as to avoid us risking inadvertently transmitting the virus to others or needing to call upon the resources of the health service. We all miss the fellowship and encouragement of worshipping physically together, but much has been developed in recent months to enable worship and care to be offered virtually or remotely in various ways, which if not the same is nevertheless important. In numerous ways we have all had to exercise restraint during this time, and to stand with others in deprivation of various kinds, which we know for many has been far greater than the loss of worshipping physically together. We therefore ask you to consider this carefully if you have not already done so and to talk it through with others.

We hope that this letter may help you with the difficult decision if not already made, recognising that we all have ambivalent feelings about this. If however you are one of the very many churches that have already decided to close for now, we hope that this letter supports you in your decision, and affirms a sense of collectively seeking to play our part and to witness appropriately in this international emergency.

Please be assured of our prayers for you and one another at this time. In Advent we recognised the darkness, but also the shining of the light which the darkness has never overcome; if the darkness continues into this New Year, so does the light, which continues to reveal the Epiphany of God's life shared amongst us in our communities and in ourselves, helping us to come through, loved by the one who loves us all.

Thank you, and God Bless,

The Revd Dr James Tebbutt