

Dear All,

22nd July 2021

I write to update you regarding plans at St Paul's following the changes in legislation on Monday 19th July as England moved to Stage Four. I recognise those will have potentially brought a range of feelings. We give thanks that restrictions are lifted, particularly as they relate to aspects of corporate worship. But for some it may have brought an increased sense of unease. There are three possible dangers for us:

Disunity – there are inevitably tensions in society, and potentially in the church as people reach different conclusions on matters which until now have been legislated. Judgementalism or friction could flow.

Self-assertion – after so long under restrictions, over which people will have had different and legitimate feelings, July 19th might mark a move to consider 'me' as the primary focus.

Fear – having been in the patterns we have been in for so long, any other pattern might feel almost unimaginable, and thus unattainable or even unwanted, so we stay where we are.

These days require great wisdom and help from the Lord. It is an area I have felt great responsibility over. However, I think we need to avoid the above three responses at St Paul's.

"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."
Ephesians 4:1-5

Unity – Christ has made us one. So we are to make every effort to maintain that bond of peace. That will mean working against inclinations to look down at each other, especially if we hold different viewpoints. It will mean loving listening and conversations.

Other-centeredness – Being humble and gentle - while we give thanks for restored freedoms, we seek to love one another, aware of the feelings of others (especially where they are different from ours), seeking to provide for a range of needs.

Boldness – There is one God and Father over all – even this pandemic. Whilst we hold the above two points, this time is also going to take courage as a church. That is not the same as recklessness. But courage nonetheless. If there is one area of life to seek to work to restore to normal I feel it is the corporate worship of our God and Father.

My aim is to help us to continue to move forward, whilst seeking to not alienate people, and enabling people to feel confident in being in church. These are plans which I have shared with the PCC for their feedback. But ultimate responsibility for their instigation falls with myself.

Two key things I wish us to know:

- 1) Please love others deeply, especially if we feel more comfortable with the changes. This is an opportunity to be extra aware of others. It will mean coming to church with others in mind (which is a good thing!) An example of how this might work out is before you sit down, look if there is someone near you – on the same pew or in front or behind. Ask something like ‘Would you feel comfortable me sitting here?’ If that person isn’t, please respect that. It is not a snub! It is an opportunity to care. If someone asks you that question and you don’t feel comfortable, though it might feel hard to say, please be honest. It helps the other person serve you by giving you space.
- 2) It is a time for us to reflect – on our situations, vulnerabilities, and where we feel on certain matters. We don’t want anyone to feel under pressure to do anything they are uncomfortable with, nor feel stigmatised because of an action that they take. It pleases the Lord when we act freely before him. If taking a certain action at this time of transition is something we feel pressured into, or is not something we are comfortable with, it is better for you, and pleasing to the Lord, not to do it. If you don’t feel free in your spirit to receive the common cup for example, it is actually better not to do so presently. Other options remain.

Key Aspects - from 24th July to 5th Sept inclusive. To be reviewed in September.

Singing – Singing to be reinstated for which we thank God! The mid-week communion service will continue to be a said service.

Face coverings – Face coverings are no longer required to be worn. But if you feel more comfortable continuing to wear one at this present time, please feel able and free to do.

Social Distancing – While there is no longer fixed seating, we recognise you may feel more comfortable with additional space at this time. Please speak to a welcomer who can help enable this. Two spaced rows at back of church building in central and right hand sections will be left free so welcomers always have options for any who feel more uncomfortable.

Please be aware of others, leaving space appropriately especially on entering, exiting and at Communion.

Holy Communion – As we celebrate Holy Communion, we will be using the common cup again. For those who feel unable to receive a shared cup, administration in one kind or through the minister dipping the wafer in a separate cup continue to be available presently. Gluten-free and non-alcoholic remain.

Peace – We may feel differently as to how to express this moment of unity. Please be aware of others’ needs and reflect that in how you share the peace. We will continue to share peace in the pews at present, rather than moving around the church building.

Coffee – We will continue to offer indoor and outdoor options.

Test and Trace – The QR code and a recording sheet will be available for those who wish to book in.

Areas being continued presently – the livestream for those unable to attend; sanitiser as we enter, exit and in preparation for Holy Communion; maintaining good ventilation and our cleaning schedule; and retaining single use items or quarantine reusable items for an appropriate period.

If you test positive and have recently been in church, please let myself or a church warden know. If you display signs of Covid-19 please hold back from attending.

If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to be in touch.

Please be praying for the Lord to be at work in us at this time, for unity, love and his upholding hand.

With love and prayers

Paul

The Revd P. A. Bye (Vicar)