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Dear friends in Christ,

I was very sorry that lockdown interrupted my project of inviting everyone on the electoral roll to tea at the vicarage in 2020. I'm now returning to the project on a smaller scale, inviting five people at a time to sit in my garden. We'll have to sit so we are distanced, and schedule rain dates as well. I'll be the only one to touch the milk jug, etc! But I really do want to continue getting to know you all better, and, especially at this time, to hear your thoughts about our churches. Perhaps best of all, we don't need to wear masks outside!

Yes, from this weekend, it will be mandatory at church to wear a face covering that safely covers the nose and mouth, and fits securely around the sides of the face. There are a few exemptions, but most of us must not come into the church building without one, and must keep it on (apart from the short period when we are receiving Communion) until we leave.

Keith and I have found it's taken quite a bit of getting used to. I must have bought about five different designs of face covering (using internet shopping) before we found a style and size that worked for us – that didn't slip off the nose, or hurt our ears, and was long enough so we could open our mouths and speak properly. Keith finds that the ear straps get tangled up with his hearing aids! (A few styles use soft ties round the back of the head rather than ear elastic, but we haven't found one of those with a front that fits us properly yet.) Because we both wear specs, we've chosen masks that have a wire to bend across the nose, to help prevent our glasses steaming up too much.

Some of you may feel like the mask is smothering you. I've found the following advice useful. First, try experimenting with it at home, where you're under no pressure and can take it off at any point. Remind yourself why we're wearing masks – to protect others and prevent virus transmission (since we can be contagious without even realising it). A face covering can be a simple scarf or bandana, as long as it covers your nose and mouth and is secure at the sides. Some people put a few drops of a calming scent on their mask, such as lavender. Acclimatise yourself by practicing wearing it in a safe space for a small amount of time and build up slowly. Be curious about what will work best for you.

Remember that face coverings are not recommended for children under 3 and they're not required for children under 11. We are obviously asked to uncover our face if we need to communicate with someone who relies on lip-reading, and you don't need to wear a face covering if it will cause you severe distress. But for the rest of us, I hope we can do this as a way of serving one another.

I've even found an encouraging Bible verse:

Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. (Song of Songs 4:3 & 6:7)

With love, Ruth