



Covid-19 Newsletter

An update from Wessex Synod
24th March 2020



Dear friends,

Following the new government guidelines, this is an update about the use of church buildings and the running of the Synod Office. As ever, we would encourage you to keep abreast of the latest advice via this link: <https://urc.org.uk/coronavirus.html>

Synod Office matters

Most Synod and Trust staff, including Deborah and Ruth Heine, are now exclusively working from home. Ralph is working between the office and home on alternate days and Anna is working in the office on her own. All of us are able to access emails remotely. Telephone calls to all office telephone numbers are set to collect voicemails and then email them to the intended recipient. The most helpful thing for you to do at this time is therefore to ring, and leave a message which says who you are, who you want to speak to, what it is about (if it is not confidential), and leave your number so that the call can be returned. All voicemail messages will be changed shortly to encourage callers to do this.

Both Deborah and Ruth H now have dedicated work mobile phone numbers which will be used during this period of 'lockdown'. Deborah's number is 07864727144. Ruth's is 07864729275. They will be answered during their normal working hours, and will be the numbers used to call back if you leave a voicemail message for them.

All other contact telephone numbers for Synod staff detailed in the Synod Directory are unchanged.

Use of church buildings

Weddings, funerals etc

The new guidelines are extremely clear in that worship services, weddings and baptisms are not permissible. Funerals are still permitted, but with as few attendees as possible, and with hygiene and social distancing guidelines followed. This includes the need for a deep clean after the event. We would clearly advise that it would be far better for all funerals to be held at the crematorium or cemetery, rather than in the church building, as they will have the appropriate equipment and staff to follow the guidelines properly.

Leaving buildings open for prayer

Whilst the government guidelines allow for churches to be left open for private prayer, there are strict rules about how this should be done. These include the need for constant staffing, proper hygiene being in place on entry, and for a deep clean to happen daily. With this in mind, we are strongly advising that you do not open your church building for individuals to come and pray.

Other use of church buildings

Previous advice suggested that such activities as Foodbanks, and meetings such as Narcotics Anonymous might continue. This has now changed.

All Local Authority areas are setting up "Hubs" for emergency supplies etc. If you are running a Foodbank, we would suggest that you get in touch with your Local Authority and ask for advice as to how they are intending to work, so that your work can potentially be integrated into the wider system of work. The Trussell Trust also has advice for local Foodbanks at <https://www.trusselltrust.org/coronavirus-food-banks/> In general we would advise you not to be running small scale Foodbanks, especially where many

volunteers may be amongst those who are deemed to be 'at risk'.

We have now reached the point where all meetings on our premises need to stop, even those like Narcotics Anonymous (NA), which can be seen as life-saving. Such organisations are working at providing other support mechanisms. At the time of writing, the advice on the NA website was updated two days ago - <https://ukna.org/covid19> - and is clearly working towards virtual meetings. I expect that groups such as NA may have already cancelled their bookings, but if they have not, the church should now make those cancellations.

We are in unprecedented times, and whilst our church buildings are out of use, the church continues. I had hoped that today's letter would be less around practical matters, and more around being the church in a time of crisis. Events have overtaken me, but I hope that later in the week I will be able to write again in a way that might encourage us to find positive ways to work, rather than ensuring physical safety. Meanwhile, if you have any questions around these issues, do contact myself or other members of the synod staff team, who will try to advise and support you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Clare Downing', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Clare Downing