

Open to Change - Welcoming Change

Supporting a Conversation within Congregational Churches



See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

(Isaiah 43:19 NIV)

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Supporting a Conversation within Congregational Churches

Whatever our attitude to change was, even before the Coronavirus pandemic and lockdown, the way that we live, worship and reach out to others as Congregational churches has certainly changed. It seems likely that some changes are here to stay, and for some of us at least, there are changes that will be welcomed. Some believe that God is calling our attention to ways that we can enhance our church witness and worship into the future.

In this document we are not using the language of 'returning to normal', because we think that is inappropriate. We can't go back, and we should not want to go back. Everything that is of real and lasting value will come with us as we move forward. Some use the language of finding our 'new normal', and that may well be right.

However, we should be careful not to assume that our future as churches will produce a new normal *across the board*. We may find that individual churches blossom in ways that are distinct to them, producing a new kaleidoscope of colour and texture across the CF. Nor should we assume that 'a new normal' is something that will then become set in stone. God may be calling us all to a new appreciation of being pilgrims in our society. We may need to become permanently more open to change and development than we have been used to being. We may need to think outside one or two boxes, with new methods and tools.

“Everything that is of real and lasting value will come with us as we move forward.”

This is exciting, but it can also be scary. We will lovingly accept that each church will move at its own best pace ... care for each other at every step ... pray constantly for each other to have discernment and courage ... allow each other to experiment and maybe not always succeed with ideas ... and look to share our human and other resources with each other. Perhaps some churches can 'buddy up' in new ways.

We also need to realise and appreciate that being open to change, and even welcoming change, is not a judgment on what has gone before. It is simply acknowledging that as society changes so the church needs to change in order to be the best witness it can be to those who live in that changing society. And one size does not fit all. Our UK 'society' has many distinct communities in it, and we have an opportunity to seek God's guidance about how best we can reach particular communities in our own neighbourhood.

We thank God for how He called the Congregational movement into being, for how He has used Congregational churches and

individuals through the generations, for how He enabled our own church to be founded and for the worship and witness of our church through the generations. We can now pray for His

“We trust God for a stronger, more effective church to emerge after the worst of the current crisis is over.”

guidance and direction as we seek to serve Him in our own generation and in preparation for the generations to come. We trust God for a stronger, more effective church to emerge after the worst of the current crisis is over.

Having a Conversation about Planning

You will already have been wondering about all of this, with concerns, perhaps actual fears, and with hopes and dreams for the future of your church. In this document, we are aiming to support you in identifying the questions and ideas that we need to consider in our particular church contexts. It is important for you to be having a proper conversation about this because it is vital that we are all planning for the future. We need to be prepared and ready, under God, when the time comes to open our doors for gatherings once again.

You may be planning to discuss this by calling one or two special church meetings to agree a church response and action plan. You may be intending to call a special meeting of the Deacons or Elders first, using their wisdom and experience to pray and think through the issues for your particular situation, and using their reflections to guide the church through those issues. It may be that for some time to come the best option for some churches will be to use emails, or whatever communication that your church is using to keep in touch with members, to invite members to share their hopes and concerns.

In whatever way you are doing this, we pray that you will be able to discern what it is that the Holy Spirit is prompting you to consider and do as we all develop our churches under God's grace and leading.

The Big Questions

The CF's immediate past President and President Elect have formulated some big questions for us all to reflect on. These will give us the context in which to commit ourselves to God's future for us. What are your thoughts about their questions?

1. What are you missing the most about Church life at the moment? What are you not missing?
2. What were the dreams and visions of your Church at the start of 2020?
3. What are you learning about God / yourself / Church during lockdown?
4. How will the mission and priorities shift in the light of this?

Other big questions will follow on from these, and they need to be considered as well. Some things to consider are the following:

- What new outreach possibilities have we seen?
- How could we prepare ourselves to get involved in them, or, if we are already involved, to develop them?
- What new community support possibilities have presented themselves to us, and how could we prepare ourselves to get involved in them or, if we are already involved, to develop them?
- Are there other agencies, charities or churches who have outreach and/or community support activities that we could join with?
- Could we offer our premises as a home for other agencies and charities?
- In what ways could our worship services become more inclusive, encouraging and helping more people to share in leading different aspects of our life as a church?

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Planning for Coming Together Face to Face

It is important to start planning now for what is likely to be the situation facing your church at the point when there is enough relaxation of the Government's lockdown measures to permit churches to open more fully. At some point we will be able to meet again for corporate worship and for other purposes in our various church buildings. We will also be able to welcome back those who make use of our premises in their community service. Some churches have already made a start on planning, but if not, the following questions are suggested for reflection.

Worship Services and Meetings for Church Members

There may well be a time-lag between being permitted to re-open our doors and people feeling confident about coming back through our doors.

- Will most of our members **who are not shielding** be confident to gather for worship or other activities even when the Government says that it is all right to do so?
- How will we include and care for those who are not confident enough to join us for corporate meetings, or who are still shielding?
- Are we prepared to delay the resumption of our worship services and other activities until all, or at least most, of our members who are able to join us are actually comfortable to gather together?
- What will we do for worship services if our Minister / Pastor is unable to lead us?
- What will we do for worship services if our organist or music group is unable to play?

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Another consideration concerns the safety and anti-virus cleanliness of our property. We will need to follow Government directions and guidance as this develops, but important questions to ask at this stage include the following:

- Can we, in the near future, risk assess how many people we can safely welcome into our church buildings when that time comes, assuming that there are likely still to be social distancing and shielding rules in place?
- Can we also prepare and put into practice an actual seating and social interaction plan, allowing for social distancing, inclusive access and confident interaction?
 - How will we mark out the buildings in terms of social distancing?
 - Will we need to remove or close off some pews or chairs in different buildings to ensure social distancing?
 - Is a one-way system through the buildings possible?
 - Would it be possible, weather permitting, initially to resume worship services outside in some location?
 - Could we consider having two staggered worship services instead of our usual one service?
 - Will we refrain from hugging and handshakes at worship services and other meetings even beyond the time when we are allowed to gather again in large

- groups within our buildings?
 - Can we ensure that windows and outside doors are kept open to facilitate the dispersal of the virus?
 - What extra preparation or guidance will we need to provide if we have children involved in any meetings or events?
 - Will we provide the refreshments before and / or after worship services and other meetings as we did before?
 - How will we make our arrangements and our renewed welcome known in the church and the community?
- Can we arrange and pay for the necessary disinfecting and cleaning regime that will be needed before we can open our buildings to people?
 - Cleaning all surfaces and objects that people may come into contact with
 - Providing appropriate hand-washing facilities as people enter and leave
 - Monitoring that
 - people *are* washing their hands as they enter and leave
 - Removing pew Bibles and hymn books, or asking people to take one of each home, bringing them with them each time
 - Providing the texts for Bible readings, the words for hymns and songs, and the words for communal prayers, including the Lord's Prayer, in another format (electronically, on a screen, or on weekly, disposable sheets).
- “Will we provide refreshments before and / or after meetings as we did before?”**
- Can we arrange and pay for the ongoing disinfecting and cleaning regime that will be needed in our buildings?
 - If a building is only used once a week there is not the same need for extensive cleaning, as the virus dies on hard surfaces after 48 -72 hours.

Worship Services Specifically

As well as the issues raised above, the following questions are also important.

- Will we refrain from communal singing – or allow only subdued singing?
- How will we administer communion?
 - Presumably those churches that use a common cup will no longer be able to do so.
 - How will the individual cups be shared? Rather than passing trays to one another, will people come to the front to pick up individual cups? If so, this will need to be done with social distancing in place.
 - We will need to ensure that the worship leader and deacons / elders involved clean their hands appropriately before and after communion, and that the communion trays and cups are also cleaned appropriately after the service.

- How will we celebrate baptisms?
 - Social distancing and other practical issues will need to be addressed, as above, for both infant and adult baptisms.
- How will we receive the offering?
 - Social distancing and other practical issues will need to be addressed.
 - Can we consider other methods of contributing our offerings (e.g. having a plate or basket at the door as people enter, encouraging members to set up a direct debit to the church)?
- How will we celebrate weddings?
 - Social distancing and other practical issues will need to be addressed.
 - Would it be possible, weather permitting, initially to resume wedding services outside in some location?
- How will we facilitate funerals?
 - Advice and guidance have already been provided regarding funerals. Please contact the General Secretary or the Government website.
- Thinking a little further ahead, how will we invite and welcome our communities to celebrate Harvest, Advent and Christmas, and how will we commemorate Remembrance Sunday?
 - Planning these services carefully, in the light of all that we are considering in this document, is important before they get too close.

“Would it be possible, weather permitting, initially to resume services outside in some location?”

Meetings and Activities of Other Groups

Individual churches will need to decide if and when they are prepared to open up their premises again to groups who use their premises for meetings of whatever kind. And those responsible for those groups will need to decide if and when they are ready to start using our premises again.

In any event, the safety and anti-virus cleanliness of our property will also apply with respect to those groups who make use of our church premises. But an important question needs to be asked about this:

- How will we ensure that any groups using our premises will adhere to our safety and cleanliness rules?

Planning ‘Remote’ Ways to Come Together

Worship Services and Outreach

Something that may not have been addressed before by your church is how to use or

develop online platforms for worship and community engagement. Perhaps because members thought that it wasn't appropriate for your church, or because you didn't have the expertise available within your membership, Could your church be open to this if you are not already involved in it in some way?

Some Congregational churches have been providing a worship service either streamed live or video-recorded and posted on Facebook, YouTube or another online platform for members and others to access and share later. They experimented successfully with this, and now have the experience and capability to do this into the future. Others have produced videos and posted them on these online platforms with sermons, Bible studies and other reflections, whether by Ministers / Pastors or other members of the church.

A number of churches have either created, or greatly enhanced, their online webpages with chat rooms, resources and blogs.

As well as online initiatives, many churches have invested time and care into creating, or greatly enhancing, weekly newsletters. They include local information pertinent to the lockdown, news of local events that are taking place, news and contact details about the church, and often, short prayers, portions of hymns and Christian songs, and a word of witness. These have been delivered to people in the local community, whether church members or not, and the responses have been very positive.

All of these online and newsletter services and resources have been reaching far beyond our church memberships, and in some cases reaching very large numbers of people. This is a massive encouragement to us as we look for ways to share God's love and enhance our witness in our communities.

“What we have been realising during the current crisis is that each church's ‘footprint’ can be far greater still.”

We have known for a long time that the ‘footprint’ of many of our churches in our local communities is far greater than the statistics of church attendance, or even church membership, might suggest. God is working through us as witnesses and servants in our communities, and we thank Him for this. What we have also been realising during the current crisis is that each church's ‘footprint’ can be far greater still.

Lessons learned and experience gained in all these initiatives and developments mean that these churches will be well placed to provide enhanced and sustainable ways of engaging with members and communities into the future. And these churches could also share their experience and growing expertise with other churches that have, as yet, not been able to move in this direction.

In the light of the above, there are some great, positive, imaginative, slightly scary questions to reflect on.

- If we were to receive advice about what software we might need to invest in, and training in its use, could we start to provide good quality live-streamed worship from the church or video-record our worship services for posting on an online platform? ¹
 - Is there someone in the church, or in a member's family, who could lead on

¹ The following sub-bullets will apply to all the questions.

- this new initiative for us?
 - What would we need to provide for those members who are unable to be with us for worship services, or for other meetings and events, so that those who would best benefit from this are able to benefit?
 - How could we prepare to follow up with those who are not members and who join us for a service?
- From the lessons we have learned from our own experiences, and those of others, could we commit to enhancing the quality and sustainability of the live-streamed worship or video-recordings of our worship services that we already have?
- If we were to receive advice and training, could we create and continuously update a contemporary-looking, good quality church website, with contact details, details of services and other provision, news and a mix of thoughtful, thought-provoking and entertaining resources?
 - Would we include, on the landing webpage, an actual invitation to contact the Minister / Pastor, or some other person, if a non-member accesses the website?
- From the lessons we have learned from our own experiences, and those of others, could we commit to enhancing the quality and sustainability of our church website?

“Is there someone in the church, or in a member’s family, who could lead on this new initiative for us?”

 - If we haven’t done this already, should we include, on our landing webpage, an actual invitation to contact the Minister / Pastor, or some other person, if a non-member accesses the website?
- If we were to received advice and training, could we start to produce a contemporary-looking, good quality, weekly or monthly newsletter?
 - How could we prepare to follow up with those who are not members and who contact us as a result of receiving our newsletter?
- From the lessons we have learned from our own experiences, and those of others, could we commit to enhancing the quality and sustainability of our newsletter?
 - If we haven’t done this already, how could we prepare to follow up with those who are not members and who contact us as a result of receiving our enhanced newsletter?

Church Meetings and Other Church Meetings

Some aspects of the initiatives and developments outlined above can also apply to other meetings for members of the church. You may also find it helpful to ask yourselves these questions:

- Can we find a way to facilitate remote participation in Church Meetings for those who cannot attend in person, whether due to a coronavirus issue or not?

- Can we facilitate this for other meetings (e.g. Deacons, Elders, fellowship groups)?

Pastoral Care

Without in any way minimising the dreadful impact of the coronavirus pandemic, and especially the lockdown in society and in families, it is also the case that a huge number of people started getting in touch and staying in touch with family and friends on a more frequent and focused basis than they had before.

This includes church families. Therefore, good questions to ask include the following:

- Do we need to give a higher priority to pastoral care in our church?
- How can we enhance the quality of pastoral care within our church? Could we perhaps create pastoral teams with members who wish to be involved in this way?

Blue Sky Thinking

There are other big questions that may be worth considering as we learn lessons from the current crisis and consider how God may be leading us into the future.

For example:

- Does our church need to meet in our church building?
 - Thinking about reaching new people in our community as well as catering for our current members, would a more attractive venue for our context be another of our buildings, or a local community hall, or a local coffee shop, or someone's home?
 - Could we sell or lease the church building, using the funds for ministries of different kinds?
 - If we sell or lease our own building, could we share a church building with a nearby church, if this was desirable to both congregations?

“what new initiative might attract teenagers, young adults, families with young children, or students ... [or] people who used to be churchgoers, but who stopped going to church some time ago?”

- Should we consider re-imagining our worship service format and content?
 - Could this be the time to consider how to involve more people in aspects of leading worship than has previously been the case?
 - Could this be the time to consider a new format, or perhaps a variety of formats in different weeks or at different times in the week?
 - Depending on your location and local communities, what new initiative might attract teenagers, young adults, families with young children, or students?
 - What might attract people who used to be churchgoers, but who stopped going to church some time ago?

Time for a Renewed Vision and Mission Statement?

Thinking deeply about what it means to be church has been forced on many of us by the current crisis. God is speaking to us now, as He always does during really hard times. As noted above, everything that is of real and lasting value will come with us as we move forward. But this is also a time when we can revisit our calling as churches and reassess our priorities and commitments.

We don't want to 'return to normal'; we want to follow God into the future, playing an active part in developing effective churches for the coming generations.

If we can be of any help whatsoever in supporting you through this period of uncertainty, and into the foreseeable future, please don't hesitate to contact us or any other member of the church support team.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 1: 3-6 NIV)

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