

Suspension of gathered worship in church

Hello Everyone,

You will know that in the light of the rising number of Covid-19 cases locally and nationally that the churchwardens, while Tom was on holiday, took the decision to temporarily close the church for public worship last Sunday. This was done after consultation with Daphne and with the support of our Archdeacon, Alastair Cutting. At the same time, they requested an emergency PCC meeting as soon as Tom returned from his holiday to decide how we should continue. They want to make sure that the church family know that this was not a decision they took lightly and was one they never wanted to make.

Since then, the Prime Minister has announced a national lockdown, the terms of which allow public worship to continue, where safe to do so. Immediately after the Prime Minister's speech, the Bishop of London, who leads the Church of England's national strategy on Covid-19, issued a statement. <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/response-bishop-london-new-covid-19-restrictions>

National Church of England guidance continues to be that each parish can make its own decision about whether to meet in person, with appropriate risk assessment and safeguards, or to suspend public worship. With this in mind the PCC met on Tuesday evening to take the difficult decision as to how we should proceed in St Mildred's.

What was particularly encouraging was that whatever their view, all approached the discussion with openness and willingness to listen to others, acknowledging that different perspectives were not only inevitable but valuable. Some brought additional perspectives from conversations or emails exchanged with others outside the PCC.

There was concern for the needs of people, particularly those on their own, who find it hard to worship in front of a video screen. Some felt it was important to remain open to those from outside the regular church membership who may come in. There were different views of whether continuing to meet is a good or bad witness to the community. Some felt that continuing to meet when almost every other form of meeting is banned was sending the wrong message to the community and potentially putting not only ourselves, but others outside the church at risk. We are privileged to have a research scientist working on Covid-19 on the PCC and we were given a clear perspective on the seriousness of the current spread of the pandemic, the threat to the NHS and the risks of meeting indoors, even with the best of precautions. Some acknowledged how easy it is to breach social distancing rules when being isolated from those around us is so foreign. Very few churches locally are continuing to meet.

In the end, the general feeling was that love for our neighbours should drive us to abstain from meeting in church for a time. PCC voted by 15 votes to 2 with 3 abstentions to suspend public worship in church, but to continue to allow a small group to use the church, with increased precautions in place, to deliver livestreamed services. The PCC will review this decision when it meets in early February.

As we were meeting, the Bishop of Southwark sent out an email reiterating the choice available to parishes, but appending a letter from the vicar of his own local parish, which has taken the same decision as St Mildred's. That letter highlighted the fact that the local figure for Covid-19 cases was 648 per 100,000 population compared to a national average of 250. The current value in Lee is 810.

Let us pray that our decision will help to slow the growth in Covid-19 cases in London. We look forward to the time when we can all meet safely in church and worship together. In the meantime, some valuable ideas sprang from the meeting to help us stay connected during lockdown, and we will try out some of those ideas in the coming weeks.

The building may be closed but the church family continues to worship the God in whom, we continue to put our trust.

Yours in Christ
St Mildred's PCC