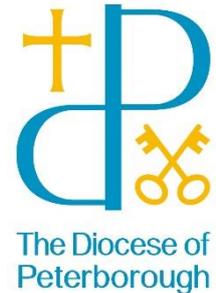


BISHOP'S LETTER No 36 7 March 2021

From Bishop Donald

To: Licensed Clergy, Licensed Lay Ministers, Clergy with PTO, Bishop's Council, Diocesan and Cathedral Staff, Diocesan Registrar, Churchwardens, Deanery and Diocesan Lay Chairs, final-year Ordinands, final-year Lay Ministry students; copied for information to Yaxley Deanery Clergy and Lay Chair



Dear friends

Greetings to you all, as we continue through what some have described as the longest Lent ever. I hope you are well, and seeing new life at the end of the dark tunnel. The Lent/Easter analogy is interesting, as the new life of Easter is a transformed life: the same person, but different. And the even greater new life towards which Easter points is transformed yet again: the same person, but a new resurrection body, imperishable, immortal, glorious. Life after lockdown will also be different, and that must include church life. Christians never look back to a golden age. The best is yet to be. We look forward to post-covid life, post-covid society, post-covid church; they will and should be different from pre-covid.

Once again I have expanded the mailing list for this occasional letter: this time to include our final-year ordinands and lay ministry students. Doubtless they have enough to read already, but some of the dates and themes below are very much for them. Perhaps receiving such a mailing at this stage will also help their transition into the new life of ordained or licensed ministry. Welcome, all of you, to this mailing list.

A reminder to the great majority of those receiving this, that since the covid crisis hit us I have also been writing a weekly bulletin to the licensed clergy. There is nothing secret about that, and anyone interested can find the back numbers [here on our website](#).

To those who receive that weekly bulletin: you have a longer letter instead this week. I'm sorry to give you even more reading matter, but I've included a fair amount of detail here which churchwardens, lay ministers, and PTO clergy, as well as you, ought to know about.

Bishop John

As many of you know, Bishop John was poorly with covid for a couple of months last spring. In the autumn he was hit by "long covid" (now officially renamed "post-covid syndrome" though I suspect the old name will stick). He was unwell in October, then off work through November, December and January. He has now been returning gradually for about six weeks. I am glad to report that he is recovering, albeit slowly. He and I both hope that he will be fully back to work by Easter.

Planning ahead

John and I have been discussing with senior colleagues the diocesan emergence from lockdown, and much of the rest of this letter reflects our conclusions. Please bear two things in mind. **First**, each parish or benefice has to make its own decisions in the light of government regulations and guidelines, and bearing in mind the local context. Parishes have my permission to suspend public worship, as long as they inform me, and to resume that within the covid regulations, again informing me via my PA [Joanne Gibson](#).

Second, much of what follows is tentative. We are making assumptions about the progress of the pandemic. We assume that the vaccine rollout will be successful, with all adults offered two doses by October, and being fully protected by November. We assume that there will continue to be restrictions to indoor gatherings, such as face coverings and distancing, for the whole of this year. We assume that new variants of the virus, and any third wave of the pandemic, will be held in check to a significant extent by the vaccines. If any of those assumptions is wrong, or if the situation changes unexpectedly, we may have to change our plans.

Ordinations

We plan to hold this year's ordinations in the Cathedral on Sunday 27 June, but with some limitations on numbers attending. I will ordain the new priests in the morning, and Bishop John the new deacons in the afternoon. Further details will follow nearer the time for the ordinands and their training incumbents, but please bear in mind that we are unlikely to be able to welcome a coachload of worshippers from each parish, or lots of family and friends, as in normal years.

Admission of Readers

Readers (formerly called Lay Readers) are admitted to their office by the bishop after training. That is a once-only act, like baptism, confirmation, or ordination as priest. Like clergy, they are then also licensed to serve in a particular parish or other context for a certain period of time. We re-license Readers and other Lay Ministers every five years in the Cathedral; the current cycle began in late September 2018.

In this diocese we admit and give the first licence to each newly-trained Reader in the parish which they will serve. Normally that involves a bishop visiting each parish receiving a new reader on a Sunday morning in the autumn, admitting and licensing people during the parish's main act of worship.

This year, as last year, we will do the Reader admissions and first licensings by Zoom, to allow maximum "attendance" and to minimize travelling. As usual, this will be in the context of a parish or benefice service, each candidate being admitted among the people they will serve. The candidates and their incumbents should already have the date and time of that service booked.

Licensing of Lay Ministers / Celebration of Lay Ministry

Lay Ministers do a two-year training course, as opposed to three years for Readers. Normally we have a day for all lay ministers in the Cathedral in late September, which includes the licensing of those newly trained, as well as worship, teaching, and fellowship. Sadly, we cannot plan for a fairly full Cathedral in September, so, as last year, I will licence the new lay ministers on the planned date, Saturday 25 September, but in a Zoom service.

I hope we can arrange some form of online gathering, with teaching and encouragement, for as many lay ministers as can manage it, also on that last Saturday of September, but I am afraid we cannot all meet in the Cathedral, and I can't invite all the lay ministers to refreshments beforehand in the Bishop's Palace, as I normally would.

I am very conscious that the 2020 and 2021 cohorts of new lay ministers will have missed their big day in the Cathedral. My intention is to put that right in 2022. Keep the date of Saturday 24 September 2022 in your diary, and watch this space.

Bishops' Visits

As bishops, we are trying to follow the best advice so as not to be carriers of the virus, especially as we usually travel around so much. Hopefully we will each have received two doses of the vaccine, followed by a three-week gap, before the ordinations at the end of June. All adults should have been offered their first dose by the end of July, and their second by October.

Until October we will prioritise online worship. We hope that most parishes or benefices will continue to offer this, to ensure that the vulnerable and the fearful can take part in worship. I have done a number of live online services and sermons, and both John and I are happy to be booked up for those. Please book us via our PAs, [Suzanne Carter](#) for Bishop John or [Joanne Gibson](#) for me. We will continue to offer some Sundays for this ministry long-term, as we think that the church post-covid needs to be online as well as meeting in our buildings.

Catch-up Confirmations

From mid-October we want to concentrate on catching up with confirmations. By then it will be 18 months since our last confirmation, and we very much want to rectify that. I have asked each Rural Dean to organise one or more Sunday afternoon deanery confirmations between mid-October and mid-December. Bishop John and I, together with our honorary assistant bishops Andrew and Ed, will cover those between us. I don't normally like deanery confirmations, much preferring to confirm even just one or two candidates in their own parishes on Sunday mornings, but this is the right thing to do this year, rather than keeping candidates waiting longer than necessary.

2022

Next year Bishop John and I hope to be available for Sunday parish visits. We aren't taking bookings yet, and we will each continue to keep at least one Sunday free each month for online services. Once we have this year sorted out, and the future landscape is a bit clearer, we will let the clergy know and open bookings for next year.

Video Sermons and Psalm Talks

Many of you are aware that I have produced a video sermon for each Sunday since last Easter, available in advance to any parish wanting to use it. I have also released a video meditation on a Psalm each Tuesday. These seem to be appreciated. I am planning to continue to make these available until at least the end of August, not least to make it easier for the parish clergy to get a good break this summer. I know that most of them have been working really hard, often behind the scenes, and in some cases without a break away, over the last year. Please, churchwardens, encourage your clergy (if the regulations allow) to get a good long break this summer. Make use of my recorded sermons, or anything else suitable, and show your clergy how much you value them. The back numbers are all available on [my YouTube channel](#), and forthcoming sermons and talks can be requested from [Rachel Lomas](#) at my office.

I'm perfectly happy to carry on producing these recorded sermons and talks beyond the summer, but only if there is demand for them.

Ministers' Conference

Since I arrived here we have organised a four-day residential conference for all our clergy and lay ministers every three years. Most of the 300+ who have attended agree that these have been thoroughly enjoyable times as well as building our sense of unity and purpose. Our fourth conference was due to take place last autumn, but was a victim of the November lockdown. We re-booked for autumn 2021, but I have just taken the very painful decision to cancel that date. Taking so many people to a conference centre with tightly packed seating for worship, teaching sessions, and meals, simply does not seem realistic this year: if only because it is likely that we will still be wearing masks and having to keep some distance at indoor gatherings even that far ahead.

Instead we are making other plans. In the November week originally reserved for the conference, we will have some online worship and teaching events for the clergy. Then, probably on Saturdays in March 2022, we hope to hold a full-day gathering for the clergy and lay ministers of each archdeaconry. That should be logistically possible, and enable some degree of the fellowship and mixing that is so important. Naturally, we will let you have details as we can work them out. It may be possible to meet altogether later in 2022: we will keep you advised about that.

Rumours and Lies

Some have been disturbed by recent articles in the media about “the Church of England” making clergy and lay staff redundant, abolishing the parish system, and what have you. There is probably no point in saying that legally there is no such body as the Church of England. Clergy are appointed by and accountable to the **Diocesan** Bishop, lay staff are appointed by and accountable to the **Diocesan** Board of Finance. Changes to parishes are a matter for the **Diocesan** Mission and Pastoral Committee. The “Church of England” doesn’t come into it. In this diocese, we have no plans or intentions to make any clergy or lay staff redundant, and we continue to believe strongly in the parish system. If you choose to read opinion columns in the media (as I do) please treat them as opinion, not fact.

Fact: we are not planning redundancies, but the covid crisis has clearly affected our finances, and this year as a diocese we are freezing the pay of our clergy and lay staff. I’m sad that we can’t give a pay rise, but that decision is proportionate and prudent. Looking ahead, we do need to encourage more worshippers (in church buildings or online) to give generously and even sacrificially as part of their life of discipleship.

Singing

You may be aware that there was a lot of research last year about the dangers of singing in spreading the coronavirus. Sadly, the conclusions seem to indicate that there is a greater danger than many imagined. For that reason, the regulations linked to the current lockdown, announced in early January, made clear that when a congregation was present only one person could sing, well distanced from the rest of the people, and only if that was essential for the worship (which is never the case in the Church of England). The same applies indoors or outdoors. Recorded music can be used, and singing can be livestreamed (all obeying appropriate copyright laws). As yet, the roadmap for relaxing lockdown does not indicate any more permission for singing to take place, and there are no suggestions that this might be relaxed for Holy Week or Easter. Hopefully, a little further ahead, I will be able to give better news on this.

And finally ...

I am so grateful to all of you (this letter goes to over 1200 people!) for your faithful work, ministry, and flexibility over this last year. We never know fully what we are signing up to in any role in life or in the church or kingdom, but it is absolutely certain that none of us predicted anything like this. Nevertheless, we have not just been passive, letting it happen around us. I have been so thrilled at the way that many parishes, chaplaincies, and other ministry contexts, have stepped up and found new ways of being Christ’s people: in worship, fellowship and service. Thank you.

With love and best wishes.

+ Donald