

1st June 2020

Dear Friends

This letter is about what might happen as the government eases restrictions.

The deacons of our church have been considering the steps we need to take in order for us to reopen our church buildings.

We are still waiting for permission from the government and the advice of the Baptist Union so everything in this letter is simply a way of exploring what may be possible. We also recognise that some people will be eager to return while others will be very cautious and are not likely to return until much later on. As the government gives us more discretion about what we can and cannot do, it's important that we respect the different choices people make, and that we take no one for granted.

The lockdown has given us the opportunity to connect in new and different ways, but they are not the same as meeting face to face and all of us miss that. As the deacons have thought about why we want to return to the church building we agreed that there is strength born of expressing and exploring our faith together and that there is more dynamism in our worship when we meet together. As a town centre church, it makes sense that we can re-inhabit our town centre building as the town centre begins to reopen. I am also mindful that for many of our friends from Iran they have come from a situation where meeting together was especially precious because it was dangerous and that it is very strange for them to be prevented from meeting in a free society.

With that in mind the deacons have been exploring the idea of beginning to reopen the building in July. We are genuinely curious to know what you think about this and the deacons will be contacting everyone to canvass your opinion and ask about what you may want to do.

If we begin to reopen the building in July it would be for guided individual prayer between ten and eleven o'clock on a Sunday. It would not be a service of worship but an opportunity for people to come and pray quietly and individually with some guidance from me or whoever was leading this from the front. We could continue to meet via zoom at 11.45 a.m. and send a service order that people could follow at home

whenever they chose.

In August this would change and we would begin having a short act of worship from 10.30 until 11.15 which would follow the same order that was being sent via email or post to everyone and we would seek to do the zoom gathering at a different time on a Sunday. In this short act of worship there would be music, and song might be gifted to us by members of the church who have recorded it beforehand, but there wouldn't be any congregational song as singing can help spread the virus.

By September we hope that the governments new tracing and testing regime would be operating well and inspiring people with confidence. Following any formal advice from the Baptist Union we hope that more full-bodied worship could begin in September when we might have a 'back to church' Sunday.

There are good things which have emerged during lockdown that we anticipate will continue to play a part in our common life. These include the what's app group, the new website that will come into its own when things begin to happen, using zoom for small meetings when people don't want to come into town and developing the pastoral letter so it becomes a monthly letter with news and information for everyone.

When we do meet it will be different, especially at first. We will be rearranging the seating so that people can be spatially distanced and providing hand sanitiser people will be invited to use as they enter the church. Everything will be thoroughly cleaned beforehand and sadly there will be no tea or coffee. We may bring the hall into use as an overflow space and will also be talking with our children's team about how we can safely provide for the needs of the children on a Sunday. We will also need volunteers to help us do this safely. When people come, we want them to be very welcome and so welcoming and stewarding will be critical tasks and we will be exploring with you who may be willing and available to share in cleaning, welcoming and stewarding.

As I said at the beginning this is merely an outline of what could happen. I want to express my thanks to the deacons who have thought so carefully about this and helped prepare this plan. We are still in a waiting season. May God bless us and his people with patience and confident hope and help us and all the nations overcome.

Your friend and pastor

Mark