

Dear friends,

We want you to know how much we miss you and our gatherings together. We pray that you are keeping safe and well, and increasingly aware of the goodness and faithfulness of God.

As the lockdown restrictions gradually ease and government advice is changing, as a diaconate we have spent time prayerfully reflecting both the practical, and theological implications for church life. Recently a number of people have asked when might we be able to open for private prayer, and when will we be open again on a Sunday? We hope to answer both in this letter.

Private Prayer

Earlier this week it was announced that places of worship would be able to open their buildings for private prayer from June 15th. This isn't something we have normally done as a church, although we did over Easter 2018 for the prayer labyrinth. Although there was lots about that time which was beautiful, it was also practically a difficult and demanding time. Someone was needed to open and close the building each day, besides others remaining in the building at all times for security and welcome. Most, if not all of these volunteers were elderly and at times felt vulnerable being on their own in a church for hours on end. From that experience, we believe a few hours a week, under normal times, is the most that we could manage to open our building for private prayer.

However, we are not in normal times. Although lockdown restrictions are beginning to be lifted, the virus has not gone away. It is still just as communicable, infectious, and dangerous to many as it has been all along. To open our building for private prayer would require volunteers to not just open and stay in the building, but to do a complete deep clean between each visit. We think that within our church family, there are around five people who are currently not shielding, working or home schooling.

It has been said that church are the people, not a building. However, the church is also a building, a sacred space, steeped in prayer, worship and memories, and we appreciate how deeply it is missed. However, the building isn't designed for 'private prayer', and the Christian faith is not a privatised religion. Churches are designed for corporate prayer and we are a corporate faith; the gathered body of Christ.

In light of all of this, we believe it is not possible to currently open our building for private prayer but encourage you to pray from home, as you already are doing.

Sunday Services

As July approaches, with the possibility that places of worship will be allowed to open again, we have spent time as Deacons prayerfully considering how we would respond if we were told the building could be re-opened on Sundays. After much consideration we have come to the view that whilst social distancing measures of 2m are in place we wouldn't re-open for Sunday Gatherings. Aware that some might be disappointed or puzzled by that decision, we want to share our thinking with you so that you too can prayerfully reflect on it and let us know what you feel God is saying.

The context for the decision is the realisation that we have just over 80 chairs in our building and regularly fill 60 of them, sometimes more. The church family that gathers on a Sunday ranges from infants through to some in their 90s. With social distancing we think we could seat around 15-20,

including those able to sit in blocks as a single household. (Although the demographic of our church means that the majority will be sat as singles or couples.)

The first consideration was that to accommodate everybody we would have to have at least 2 gatherings on any given Sunday, even if some were shielding at home. There are a few implications from this:

- those serving would be exhausted after successive gatherings
- how could we deep clean between each successive gatherings?
- how would we decide who came at what time?
- how would we handle and welcome visitors?

The second consideration was children. Normally children are "free range", would we be able to force them to stay in a chair throughout a gathering and, even if we could, would that be desirable? It would be a massive culture change from "everybody is family and mingle" to "sit still and don't interact". Then we have some younger children who have limited or perhaps nil understanding of social distancing.

The final consideration was theological - what is a Sunday Gathering? We believe it to be the family of God coming together to worship and fellowship, that doesn't happen if we have to split into different disparate groups meeting at different times. Besides splitting into different congregations, a significant number of our church family would be unable to attend as they continue to be in the shielding group. Even for those who are gathering together, it is unlikely that we would be able to sing, greet one another with handshakes and hugs, or share a drink after the service; things which we appreciate are being missed hugely at this time!

So from a practical perspective we can't see how socially distanced meetings could work in our current building. From a theological perspective we are not happy with the idea of artificially splitting the church family up and requiring us to meet at different times. On reflection we felt that under social distancing measures, the benefits of physical gatherings, over our online services, were not significant enough to change practice now, and that our online services were a better way of maintaining an inclusive community at this time. We are also mindful that these are supplemented with online quizzes, mid-week small groups, after church chats, prayer meetings, and so on.

We do feel that when the 2m restrictions are relaxed then we would review this decision in further conversation with the church, and particularly those who would likely be continuing to shield. In the mean time we will work to ensure all who want to, can access the provisions of our online services and additional materials and look at additional and creative ways of being church, within the guidelines we must live at this time.

We wish to convey how difficult these conclusions have been to come to, we miss the fellowship of worshiping, laughing and gathering together and look earnestly to the day that can happen again. But for now, this is the situation we find ourselves and trust our gracious, faithful God to lead and care for us all at this time.

As we said at the start of this letter, we would welcome your prayerful reflections on the situation and encourage you to let us know what you feel God is saying at this time.

With much love, and our continuing prayers,

St Helens Baptist Church Diaconate