

Dear Friends,

I hope you are keeping safe and staying in contact. As I'm writing it's two months into 'lockdown' and we're hearing talk of lifting some of the restrictions, some schools may return (at least for some pupils), some shops may reopen with appropriate measures. Many are being encouraged to go back to work – but not on public transport. Of course, there are still concerns. Is it too early? Will there be a second peak of infection? And what of the nature of life in the coming weeks? Undoubtedly there will be changes. Shops may open but there will still be limits on the number of shoppers, and different patterns for how we shop. Who will have a job to return to? And we are all too aware of those we have lost over the past two months, and those we may lose in the days to come. This makes the question of how we shift to the 'new normal' all the more poignant – we know how much it has cost to get where we are. But what our 'new normal' will look like.

It seems unlikely that we will be allowed to reopen churches before early July and, even then, what we might be able to do is not clear. In Germany, for example, the churches have been allowed to open their doors – but they cannot sing in worship. It seems that the risk of transmitting the virus are increased by the deep breaths you need to sing. How would you feel about meeting for worship without singing God's praise? I know that I would find it very strange, even though when we were living in Hertfordshire we regularly attended an early morning communion service at our church at which there were no hymns. We have some serious thinking to do, and perhaps some even more serious praying. What shape is God asking the Church to take, and when? It's interesting to hear that Hillsong, with very large congregations, are suggesting that they won't be meeting for worship in person until 2021 but will, instead, concentrate on streaming their services over the internet. I'm aware that some who found it difficult to join in worship on Sundays have been able to join us each week as we meet by phone and internet. I wonder, have we found ways to be more inclusive during lockdown – ways that we need to take forward once we can open our buildings again?

One thing that occurs to me is how much more the church is than we often give it credit for. It's more than a building (or buildings) no matter how fond of them we are. It's more than gathering for a little while on a Sunday morning, no matter how much we gain from that time together. It's more than a social gathering, or a help for the community, no matter how much that is needed. It is so much more because it is the expression of God's presence in and through the world. It is a means of support and guidance, a community of welcome and freedom. It is a place for new beginnings and hope. Whatever doubts we have about the future we should know that God is more than capable of bringing us through. The challenge is for us to live this out. We have a chance now to think afresh, to imagine, to dream. What will we do when our doors open again? How will we welcome? How will we care? How will we encourage and heal? I am convinced that God is offering us an opportunity, I have already heard some ideas about what our 'new normal' might be like, how it might be more than it was before – what are your ideas for a more than 'new normal' church?

May the Father, who can keep us safe, hold you in his embrace.

May the Son, who walks with us, be your trusted companion.

May the Spirit, the breath of God, fill your heart and soul.

May your life be more, and your vision sure.

May the coming days lead you into dreams fulfilled.

God bless,

Allan.