

Emerging from Lockdown: Phase 3 Introduction from College of Bishops

“Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13.34).

“Our Lord Jesus Christ said: The first commandment is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all Your strength.’ The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-40)

For the first time in its history, the Church has been prevented from gathering face to face for worship. We have continued to worship from home, online and on paper, but we have not come together as congregations now for four months, one third of a year.

We have accepted this loss for the sake of love, because, as Christians, love of God and love of neighbour can never be separated. The danger of passing infection to others, rather than fear of being infected, is what has kept us away from church. But it has been a real deprivation, not just as individual Christians who miss going to church, but as the whole Church, called to be the gathered people of God.

But now, in Phase 3, it will become possible for us to gather together again for worship. The careful conditions for gatherings in church described here will make the experience of worship quite different from anything we have known: the Eucharist in one kind only; the wearing of face coverings; the distance between worshippers; the absence of singing. But there are two reasons why being able to worship at all, even with these conditions, is something we can give thanks for. Both are about who we are as the Church of Jesus Christ.

First, because, just as we have done by not coming together for worship but worshipping from home, so now, by gathering again but under the limitations and restrictions described here for Phase 3, we can continue to express Christ’s care for one another and for others around us. Our gathering for worship can be the means of loving not only God but loving our neighbour, of following Jesus’ new commandment, “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13.34).

Second, because we can gather again for worship we will be able again to fulfil more completely the Church's basic calling to be the visible Body of Christ in the world. Jesus taught that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18.20), and the embodied nature of this calling is what causes Christians to gather in worship, especially on Sunday, the Lord's Day. And when we gather, as Christians have gathered since the earliest times, to celebrate the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the embodied sacrament of our salvation, we seek to fulfil Jesus's other commandment to "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11.24). As Dr John Davies, former Convener of the Liturgy Committee, writes:

The life of the Church, as the worshipping community of all the baptised, has the Eucharist at its heart. The people of God meet Christ, above all, in the Eucharist. Through the liturgy of the Eucharist we truly become the body of Christ, are fed by him in Word and Sacrament, and are sent out into the world to proclaim the good news of his kingdom.

We have learnt much during this period of physical separation, we have learnt how much we desire to gather at the altar and share in the sacrament of love. We have also learned that there are many new ways of gathering people together, of enabling greater participation from those unable to come to the church and ways of speaking out to our communities, calling them into faith. We will continue to learn and develop these things, yet at heart we are the community gathered around the table and we wait patiently for the day when we can do this free from restrictions.

The possibility of returning to worship and to share in the Eucharist together is good news for us, for the whole Church, and for the world we seek to serve in Christ's name.

Statement issued by the College of Bishops of the Scottish Episcopal Church