



**The Right Revd Ian Paton**

Bishop of St Andrews  
Dunkeld and Dunblane  
Scottish Episcopal Church

12th July 2020

Dear friends,

Many of us are eager to return to worship in church as soon as we can. So many people have told me how deeply they miss receiving Communion, and so many clergy have told me how much they miss being together with their congregations. At the same time, we know that returning will not simply be a matter of opening the doors, but will require careful planning and commitment to keeping everyone safe. And we know that not everyone will be able to come to church because they will need to remain shielded at home for some time yet.

So the Scottish Government's recent announcement that churches will be able to re-open for public worship is welcome, as we await the circulation of the Bishops' Advisory Group Guidance for the possible re-opening of SEC churches. The Guidance may look detailed and complicated, but it is meant to assist us as we consider the very important question of how to return to worship, safely.

We have all suffered the stresses and strains of the last few months, and the clergy especially have been working incredibly hard, providing worship online or on paper, giving pastoral care, supporting the sick or bereaved, helping congregations to stay in touch. They are now very tired, and just at the time when many people might be taking a well-earned break from work, perhaps going on holiday, they are having to think carefully about re-starting worship in church.

But the Guidance says *how we may open*, not *when we must open*. I want to encourage clergy and vestries to take time about this. Some may feel able to open on the first available Sunday, some to start with a weekday service, others to delay opening for worship for weeks or even months. All of these possibilities are fine, and depend on what is realistic.

So congregations will return to worship as they are able, and they will be different from each other about this. But one thing will be the same. And that is our calling to be, in the words of the Ordination liturgy, "the People of God, the Body of Christ and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit." Yes, our return to worship will heed all the requirements of safety, not because we love ourselves too much to take the risk but because we love others too much to put them at risk. But we should also be clear about *this*: that we *will* return to worship together, to breaking the bread and blessing the cup, just as soon as we can, delaying not one day more than we have to. And we will do this because we are called to be "the Church, the Body of Christ and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit," and because we are called by Jesus to "do this in remembrance of me."

So as we make our plans to return to worship, let's be realistic, let's be kind (especially to our clergy), and let's be faithful to our calling.

With blessing and prayer,

+ Ian