

MENSTON METHODIST CHURCH

Dear Friends,

Following the advice given by the Government yesterday the Methodist Church has today sent out guidance to all churches that all public acts of worship should be put on hold for the time being. Therefore, regrettably, all services at Methodist Churches across the Wharfedale & Aireborough Circuit have now been suspended. The Circuit Staff will be working to develop ways of enabling people to worship, pray and study in their own homes. Further details will follow in the coming days.

I have this afternoon read an article by Erin Wathen which I think will help us all gain a little perspective and consider how we can continue to express our calling as Methodist Christians. I have edited it for our context.

Five ways of being Church when Church is cancelled!

Perhaps of all the cancellations taking place across society this week, that of services of worship is the most unnerving. This seems counterintuitive in a time when people are anxious and need community; when people are facing economic uncertainty and need support; and when people are fearful and need the comfort of prayer and connection. And yet—we have to acknowledge that “large gatherings” are a hotspot for the spread of disease, and that church services can be pretty cosy experiences as far as personal space goes. For all of our best efforts to eliminate hand shaking and peace passing, and to modify communion practices, the best way to protect folk right now is to keep them apart.

It's sad. It's painful. It goes against every impulse of church leaders who proclaim faith in a God who is bigger than human fear. And it rubs up against the ego of those who think of themselves as hardy enough to weather any storm and get to church early to get the coffee going.

I get it. I really do. But sometimes, painful as it is, cancelling is the responsible, compassionate thing to do, and anything else is just hubris. Think of this illness as the black ice of liability. If there is a blizzard, you might be able to get to church. But if you can't clear the pavements and the car park, do you really want to invite people into a hazard situation—the invisible threat that is just under the surface? This is like that.

Sure, folk who are not sick are going to feel like they should still come to church. But they could be carrying something they don't know they have yet, and pass it right on to their elderly or immunocompromised neighbour.

There are many unknowns here. There is unprecedented territory ahead, and nobody can say how long it might last. So, at this time of cancellation here are some things to remember, and some ways to keep "being the Church," even when you can't be in the church building.

1. ***Support your Ministers.*** And lay staff, and stewards, and church council members— whoever has to make the really hard decisions about whether and how to gather in times of uncertainty. There is no road map for this, and there is no one right answer. Trust that the folk who ultimately make the call spent some time in prayer, discernment, and very difficult conversations. Know that they heavily weighed consequences, including your disappointment, and ultimately did what they thought was the best thing for the wellbeing of the community. Thank them for having your best interests at heart, and then...
2. ***Check on your neighbours.*** You older neighbours, your neighbour on chemotherapy, your neighbour whose child relies on free school meals, your neighbour who still has to go to work and could use help with childcare... Any time you help someone in your proximity, you are living out the values of your faith community. You are embodying what the gospel is about, which takes church out of the building and brings it to life for others. This is what we go to church to learn how to do— it is 'for such a time as this' that you have spent all those other Sundays in worship. But please make sure you ring first if you are able to and that you follow government advice on hygiene precautions.
3. ***Pray for your church family.*** And send notes. Make phone calls. All the things that we do for people who are house-bound, do for each other now that we are all house-bound to a degree. We are one body, even when that body is not together in the flesh. There are plenty of ways to stay connected in spirit, and care for each others' spiritual needs. Resources for both worship and pastoral care will be developed and distributed over the coming days. Make good use of them
4. ***Practice Sabbath.*** For some, this shutdown of life as we know it is going to cause significant economic hardship. In the spirit of #2, care for your neighbour as best

as you can. In the meantime, recognise if your own discomfort is just inconvenience, and keep that perspective. Recognise that a slower pace of life can be a gift— an imposed sabbath of time to sit still and be with your family, without the usual rush of places to be and things to accomplish. Read together; prepare meals together, pray together, get creative! When's the last time everybody was home for this long? Talk about what you can learn from this season. Talk about your blessings. Play a game. Make something. Listen to music. It really doesn't matter. Any of these things can be worshipful in their own way, if by 'worship' we mean rest and renewal by way of connecting with God and others.

5. ***Continue in your giving.*** This may seem like a small thing in the grand scheme right now, but trust me. It matters that you continue to make your offering, as long as you are financially able. This is a great time to re-examine giving by direct debit or standing order. Even the healthiest congregations can find themselves in a financial hole after just a few Sundays of missed offerings. Many of our external lettings which bring vital income into the Church have already cancelled bookings. So please speak to your Minister or Church Treasurer to find out how you can best make your offering. Even if the building is empty, bills and salaries need to be paid; what's more, you're helping your church maintain mission commitments to the community in a time when that commitment is more important than ever. Our churches will be encouraged to increase the size of their Benevolent Fund in order to be able to provide financial assistance to those in need but we cannot do this if your giving to the church stops because you aren't able to come to a worship service.

The Church, along with the rest of society, is going to have to get used to a new way of being. These five practices or "means of grace" are a part of our new, developing story. There will be many challenges along the way, and no doubt the letting go of much that is dearly held. But out of that letting go, God can use this space and time to reform us for new ways of expressing Our Calling "to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission."

With every blessing

Rev Tim Perkins