

Dear All,

Yesterday was the Feast of the Epiphany when we traditionally commemorate the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child. It celebrates God's manifestation or revelation to the Gentiles through his incarnation. Epiphany refers not only to the day itself but also to the church season that follows it.

In our journey through the Covid-19 pandemic we have also entered a new season, a new period of 'lockdown' within the wider community. This will impact directly on the church and so the following statement will be issued this afternoon to the media. This decision has been taken to protect everyone's health and well-being. A similar approach has also been adopted by the other main churches in Northern Ireland.

- Following further briefing today by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride and the Chief Scientific Advisor, Professor Ian Young, and in consultation with The Executive Office, as Church Leaders we fully recognise the very serious position that Northern Ireland finds itself in at this time with the extremely high level of transmission of the Covid-19 virus. The escalation of numbers in hospital and intensive care is placing immense pressure on our healthcare staff; the number of deaths; and the very clear warning from health officials that over the next weeks the situation is going to worsen significantly; is of grave concern to us all.
- We recognise that clergy and parishioners have together worked steadily to implement protocols which have ensured that public gatherings for worship have been as safe as possible since the re-opening of our buildings in early summer. We also appreciate that the NI Executive has acknowledged over the last 10 months the importance of people being able to gather in person for worship. The ongoing engagement between faith communities and the NI Executive is warmly welcomed and is something which we believe has been, and continues to be, of benefit to wider society.
- However, in light of the current serious and worsening situation and in line with clear public health guidance that people should *stay at home*, we have decided that all public gatherings for worship and all other in person church activities should cease for our particular denomination, until Saturday 6th February 2021, subject to review in late January, with the exception of weddings, funerals, arrangements for recording and/or live-streaming, drive-in services and private prayer (as permitted by regulations). We note and welcome the fact that the same position has been adopted by the Presbyterian Church, Roman Catholic Church, Methodist Church and others in Northern Ireland.
- In making this decision for the 'greater good' of all within our community we continue to remember in our prayers the sick and bereaved, all who are suffering, those whose lives have been directly impacted by Covid-19, praying too for those in positions of responsibility who are faced with making difficult decisions at this challenging time.

Like our Schools we are encouraged to go online for the next while and we are to find alternative ways of worshipping together in a virtual way and offering support to one another. Lockdown this time will be very different from that experienced around Easter as the weather has now turned very cold and the days are dark. Please encourage parishioners to make an extra effort in continuing to 'care for their neighbours'. The numbers attending weddings and funerals in Northern Ireland will remain at the current figure of 25 people. These important occasions in family life, conducted in the prayerful and hopeful context of Christian worship, need more than ever to be approached with great sensitivity and compassion. As you care for those in your charge please also make sure to look after the health of your own family, as well as your own well-being.

There is light on the horizon in the vaccination programme that is now in place and being implemented across the country. There is also a tiny stretch in the days which means a bit more light each day. As we continue to walk in faith, may we all be continually drawn to the light, the true light of the world and in his light find encouragement, strength and hope.

In the words of the Collect for the Feast of the Epiphany:

Lord God, the bright splendour whom the nations seek: May we, who with the wise men have been drawn by your light, discern the glory of your presence in your incarnate Son; who suffered, died, and was buried, and who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

Every blessing,

+John