

STATEMENT FROM THE CHURCH OF IRELAND BISHOPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

ST PATRICK'S DAY 2021

Last year on St Patrick's Day, advice was issued to all our clergy with the unprecedented instruction that in the light of evolving Government advice, until further notice, all Sunday and midweek services should be suspended, and all Parish organisations and activities should cease. At that time, we had little knowledge of Covid-19 nor could we have imagined the devastating impact it would have upon the world, our country and on individual lives. We continue to remember in our prayers the sick, the bereaved, the isolated and fearful and also to give thanks to God for the courageous and sacrificial actions of our health care workers who have worked tirelessly in our hospitals and wider community to care for all whom the virus has impacted upon most directly.

A difficult year has passed, and a hard road has been travelled but we have reached a new junction. In person gatherings for worship and Parish organisations have been voluntarily suspended since early in January 2021, but we have decided that the time has now come for a cautious and careful return to in-person church services from Good Friday (2nd April 2021). This news will be warmly welcomed but is simply permissive rather than instructive. Some may wish to continue online and/or drive-in services for the time being due to their own local situation. From 1st April outdoor gatherings in a public space will allow for 10 people from 2 households to meet up. This therefore means that customary Easter Dawn services cannot take place this year in their normal form. Parish activities and meetings also remain suspended in the interim, but meetings of General Vestry can take place at the close of Sunday worship as part of an in-person gathering.

No changes have been made to the operation of church buildings as places of worship. Congregation numbers will continue for the time being to be limited according to 2 metre social distancing seating capacity. Parish officers must carry out a risk assessment and ensure that good mitigation is in place and that face coverings are worn by congregation members on their arrival and exit from the church building and throughout services. We all need to play our part in preventing any further transmission of Covid-19 within the community. Marriages and funerals will continue to take place in line with the current restrictions.

We note that the same position of a cautious return to in-person worship at Easter time has been adopted by the Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church and Roman Catholic Church and welcome the co-operation and strong working relationship between the churches.

The message of Easter is one of Hope. From the cross of Calvary to the empty tomb, from death to new life. Echoing the words of the First Minister yesterday, we would encourage everyone to reflect on the road we together have travelled and to continue to pray this Easter for recovery from the pandemic, healing, peace, and a renewed hope. As we journey onwards, we are mindful that we still have further to travel, but we do so trusting in our crucified and risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

+John Armagh
+Andrew Derry and Raphoe
+David Down and Dromore
+George Connor