

## RLBC & The Coronavirus – 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Right. Take a deep breath. Then, as you exhale, say, “*God is good. He is still in control.*”

Next put the kettle on and make yourself a cuppa, this is going to be a long read.

Done that? Now have a seat and read this ...

### 1. Relax

There is nothing to be scared of here. The Christian church has been coping with viruses for 2000 years. The last time we faced something as serious as this was probably the ‘Spanish flu’ after WWI but the church is the one institution that has been coping with outbreaks like this for centuries, even before the British government existed. In fact, many historians put the curious growth of the early church (under persecution) largely down to the way the church under Cyprian responded to a plague in North Africa in the third century. This is what we do!?

Yes, this virus needs a national strategy because it is new but there is no reason to be more fearful than normal. Be sensible. Wash your hands regularly. Keep social interaction to a minimum. But most of all, relax. It is all going to be okay. God has got this. Even if we catch the virus God is still good and he is still in control. In many parts of the world people have to cope with worse crises (e.g. hurricanes, bush fires, tsunamis, Ebola) on a fairly regular basis – now we know what the rest of the world feels like. Please pray that the Lord will use this to teach the people of the UK that we cannot control everything and to bring people back to himself.

As a LT we will be reviewing government advice regularly but what follows is the current state of play:

### 2. All Church Meetings are cancelled (until further notice)

Everything. Sunday services. Mid-week meetings. Scouts. The lot. We will review this on a weekly basis – until then please do not come to any formal meetings at RLBC.

### 3. 11am Sunday service Livestream

Thanks to Arun for working on this. Until further notice there will be just one service on a Sunday (with no congregation) which will be livestreamed from 11am. Please go to our website – [www.rlbc.org.uk](http://www.rlbc.org.uk) – where there will be instructions as to how to view the livestream services. Unfortunately it is not possible to view this on your TV and so only people with a computer (with internet access) or Smart ‘phone will be able to view the services. We are sorry that this will exclude a few people but we are merely following the advice of the government.

### 3. Church Office is OPEN!?! (0208 868 6772)

Although meetings are cancelled the church office will be open to help you. Isolation may help us physically (by slowing down the spread of the virus) but it is not good for us spiritually or emotionally. Therefore, **from next Monday**, we will try to keep the office open 9am-3pm every week day (Mon-Fri) so that you can call if you need help or pop in for a 1-2-1 chat with a real live human being. In particular for the elderly – we can’t offer the service of 999 or even 111 but we hope that 0208 868 6772 is there for you! (NB This will be under review and it is possible that we may have to close to people completely... but even then we will do ALL we can to remain open to ‘phone calls.)

As we become less meeting focussed we must switch to thinking in a more relational and organic way. This can be a great opportunity for RLBC! We want to turn the Church Office into a ‘War Room’ – coordinating care for the church. Port and cigars are not essential, but we do want to hear Churchillian phrases disseminating through the puffs of smoke!

**Volunteers** – we also plan to have a team of volunteers ready to help those who are self-isolating (e.g. drop off shopping or medicine.) If you have access to a car and are willing to be part of this team then please reply to this email offering your services and telling us how best to contact you (e.g. ‘phone number). (Obviously this excludes anyone who is not in good health or suspects they may have the virus.)

#### **4. Let's look out for one another**

This is a real opportunity for the church in the UK. Let's show the British public that we are Christ's disciples by how we love one another (John 13: 35). Please keep an eye out for others you know at church. The new *ChurchSuite* app should work as a directory so that you can contact each other. Peter Smith, and others, are going to try to chase up anyone who has not yet signed up. (You need to double-check that you have gone online and 'clicked' that you give us permission to contact you in this way.) Please pass on the information in this sheet to anyone you think may not have received the email. (We are going to print off hard copies of this and deliver it to people we think will not get it otherwise – feel free to print it off and do the same to anyone you are worried about.)

Why not make a list of the people you normally see at church and decide to call them a couple of times a week to make sure they are doing okay? (Especially do this for those at higher risk from the virus – the elderly and infirm.) Be creative – think of ways to encourage one another without meeting in person ... how about praying over the 'phone together or sharing what you have learnt recently from the Bible or a sermon?

#### **5. Deacons' Lists**

Last year the fellowship was put into groups and each Deacon has a list of people to 'watch over' - to support the general 'one anothering' and to try and make sure no one 'falls through the cracks'. Each deacon will also try to call the vulnerable on their list once a week.

#### **6. Youth Ministry**

This means that our youth meetings will also need to be cancelled until further notice. James is working hard to make sure that young people still remain connected and supported while we are not meeting formally.

Youth Alpha will meet one last time tonight but with extra hygiene precautions. But... after today RLBC will be stopping all midweek groups until further notice as a precaution. On a pastoral level, meeting this Thursday for one last time provides us the opportunity to consult with the young people how best to stay in touch and support them through online and social networking while we don't meet. The youth team are already exploring ways in which we can effectively e.g. uploading devotionals to social media and continuing direct communication. However, if you have any suggestions and ideas how we can support you as a family through this time then please do get in touch with James - [youth@rlbc.org.uk](mailto:youth@rlbc.org.uk)

#### **7. Children & Families**

Due to the exceptional circumstances, Karen is going to postpone the next two month 'chunk' of her Sabbatical until next year. That means that she will start back at work at RLBC at the weekend – she is currently seeing her Dad, George, who is terminally ill. (Please continue to pray for Karen, and others, who have other concerns than just the coronavirus.) Along with James and myself, Karen will be thinking about creative ways to support children and families over this period of isolation. We will be looking at digital resources to go alongside livestreaming.

#### **8. Home Groups / Informal meetings**

At the moment this is a wisdom call. There is no reason why Home Groups could not divide into smaller groups and carry on meeting – as long as the numbers were small and you could maintain good social distance etc. However, we would urge anyone who is at risk (or lives with someone who is at risk) not to attend even such small informal gatherings. If in any doubt, DON'T GO! Yet, for those who are fit and healthy this could be a really good way to carry on 'doing church'. Attached are the questions for next week's HGs – if you are low risk then why not meet up with someone else to do the study together? (If you are high risk, could you do it via skype?)

#### **9. AGM + Associate Pastor Recruitment**

All this means that the joint service and AGM due for March 29<sup>th</sup> will need to be postponed. Instead we will just have a 'normal' livestreamed service next week. The plan is still to send out the papers for the AGM – so you have something to read while you are stuck in doors! Likewise this will inevitably slow down the search committee (Associate Pastor) considerably.

## 10. Giving

During this time when church services and activities are not taking place, it is still important that we are able to continue to pay staff salaries and also the 'fixed cost' expenditure that still needs to be paid even though the church is not open. We are thankful for your faithful giving to the church and would ask that you continue to make your gifts to the church, if you are able to. If you currently make your gifts through the offering taken at the Sunday morning services, please would you consider making your gifts by BACS. If you have access to online banking and are able to do this the church's bank details are:-

BANK: CAF Bank Limited  
ACCOUNT NAME: Rayners Lane Baptist Church  
SORT CODE: **40 52 40**  
ACCOUNT NUMBER: **00022474**

For some people online banking is not an option and in this case it will be possible to make your gifts to the church by coming into church and putting your envelope or donation in the offering box in the church office. Alternatively, you may post your cheque to the church, marked for the attention of Celia Clark. Any donations received at the church will be collected by Celia on a regular basis and banked. Thank you for your continued support of the ministry at RLBC. If you have any questions or concerns about financial giving, please contact Celia (01895 635637 or [celia.clark@btinternet.com](mailto:celia.clark@btinternet.com))

## 11. CAP & Foodbank

Foodbank are going to stay open as long as possible - they are happy for RLBC volunteers to collect ready made food parcels, at the usual distribution centres and during the usual times, on behalf of CAP clients and distribute them. Please contact the Office and Debbie will liaise with CAP clients.

## 12. Think Christianly about the virus

James will be preaching about this on Sunday morning. Join us on livestream as we think and pray about it together.

Here are two quotes from two books (about 500 years apart) that will help you think about how the gospel should shape our response...

First of all this is Martin Luther's approach as he faced the plague, known as 'the Black death'.

*"I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbour needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God."*  
The Annotated Luther, Volume 4: Pastoral Writings, p 404.

Second - a few years ago the LT at RLBC read a book together about gospel ministry in church - *The Trellis and the Vine*, by Colin Marshall & Tony Payne. Celia Clark reminded me the other day how the book ends. The context of the book needs a little translating – the writers are Anglicans who live in Australia and are writing for the church in Sydney. Nevertheless the 'thought experiment' that they came up with in 2009 has an eerie resonance today. It takes a hypothetical church and imagines how it might come with a virus pandemic. You may not like exactly the way they do it but I hope it causes you to think. Read this and spend some time thinking and praying about how the coronavirus will change church over the next few weeks and possibly months. Then think about what changes we may want to keep after the crisis has averted.

*Imagine this...*

*As we write the first worrying signs of a swine flu pandemic are making headlines around the world. Imagine that the pandemic swept through your part of the world, and that all public assemblies of more than three people were banned by the government for reasons of public health and safety. And let's say that due to some catastrophic combination of local circumstances, this ban had to remain in place for 18 months.*

*How would your congregation of 120 members continue to function – with no regular church gatherings of any kind, and no home groups (except for groups of three)?*

*If you were the pastor, what would you do?*

*I guess you could send regular letters and emails to your people. You could make phone calls, and maybe even do a podcast. But how would the regular work of teaching and preaching and pastoring take place? How would the congregation be encouraged to persevere in love and good deeds? Especially in such trying circumstances? And what about evangelism? How would your people be reached, contacted and followed up? There could be no men's breakfasts, no coffee mornings, no evangelistic courses or outreach meetings. Nothing.*

*You could, of course, revert to the ancient practice of visiting your congregation house to house, and door knocking in the local area to contact new people. But how as a pastor could you possibly meet with and teach all 120 adults in your congregation, let alone their children? Let alone door-knock the suburb? Let alone follow up the Contacts that you made?*

*No, if it was to be done, you would need help. You would need to start with ten of your most mature Christian men and meet intensively with them two at a time for the first 2 months (while keeping in touch with everyone else by phone and email). You would train these 10 in how to read the Bible and pray with one or two other people, and with their children. Their job would then be twofold: to pastor their wives and families through regular Bible reading and prayer, and to each meet with four other men to train and encourage them to do the same. Assuming that 80% of your congregation was married, then through these first 10 men and those that they subsequently trained, most of the married adults would be involved in regular Bible based encouragement.*

*While that was getting going (with you offering phone and email support along the way), you might choose another bunch to train personally – men and women who could meet with singles, or people who had potential in door-knocking and evangelism, or people who would be good at following up new Contacts.*

*It would be a lot of personal contact, and a lot of one to one meetings to fit in. But remember, that there would be no services to run, no committees, no parish council, no seminars, no home groups, no working bees (Aussie term for maintenance days at church) in fact, no group activities or events of any kind to organise, administer, drum up support for, or attend. Just personal teaching and discipling and training your people in turn to be disciple-makers. Here's the interesting question: after 18 months, when the ban was lifted and you were able to recommence Sunday gatherings and all the rest of the meetings and activities of church life, what would you do differently?*

Imagine ...

Yours in Christ,



John Smuts (on behalf of the RLBC Leadership Team).