Dear colleague,

You may well be aware of some ‘mixed messaging’ which has developed in the last 24 hours around guidance on church closures and funerals.

The latest Government advice is seemingly somewhat at odds with the national church’s stance as detailed in a letter dated 24 March which you received from the Archbishops and bishops.

That letter set out the need for all of our churches to be closed, with immediate effect, for all public worship, private prayer and as places where a single clergy person can say the office by themselves. No livestreaming was to be allowed in churches. Churches which hosted Food banks could still open for that purpose though operating under strict guidelines.

Furthermore the letter detailed that funerals must not be held in our church buildings. They can still take place at crematoria and at the graveside with limits on the number of people who can attend – the national church guidelines advise only immediate family members (if the crematorium allows) – that is, spouse or partner, parents and children, keeping their distance in the prescribed way.

**Whilst latest Government advice has stepped back from some of these measures, I want you to know that, as a Diocese, we are choosing to continue to adhere to the original national church guidance. Our churches are to remain closed. No livestreaming should take place in church. No funeral services should be conducted in church buildings.**

Quite simply our stance as a Diocese is based on the public health advice we continue to receive. We have a duty to do everything we can to slow the spread of Coronavirus. The actions, as detailed above, can only help in this regard and are very much in line with calls from those within our health service to ‘Stay at home, save lives’.

Please note that, for insurance reasons, and in line with national church guidance, one designated person will be able to check the church once a week. They should do so alone.

Whilst I know the situation remains deeply unsettling and has the potential to create tensions, we should all continue to abide by the original national church advice.

Again, may I encourage you to share this with others in your parishes who need to know it, especially retired Clergy, Readers, LLMs and Churchwardens.

May I also take this opportunity to thank you all for everything you are doing. I am immensely grateful for the support and care you are giving to our communities in such difficult times.

Warmest wishes,

Bishop James