

Dear Colleague

*“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”* Matthew 16:18

We have written to you before quoting these words of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew, but perhaps they seem more relevant to us now than ever before. It feels that in the last few days and weeks, all aspects of our daily lives have been shaken: the way we worship together; our relationships with each other; security over our health, our finances and the wider economy.

And yet Jesus reminds us that in these most uncertain of times, we can be certain that the Church is built on a solid foundation and nothing, be it the gates of Hades or covid-19, will ever overcome it.

There are few times in our lives when we have been prouder to be part of the Church than now. We may not be meeting together on Sunday mornings, but the church has rallied together to intercede on behalf of our nation; to practically support those in quarantine or suffering particular financial hardship and to provide comfort, peace and hope to the millions of citizens who are feeling isolated, fearful or vulnerable right now. We urge you as the body of Christ to continue to be lights in these troubling times and to continue to find creative and meaningful ways to ‘be Church’ and worship together.

In the current situation it seems incongruous to have to write to you about finance, and yet, as the news headlines tell us, it is a subject that we cannot ignore. As your Bishops we are committed to ensuring the continued thriving of the local church in these most challenging times. Many clergy have already shared with us significant concern about the impact of terminating worshipping together on the future financial viability of their local churches, as plate and envelope giving ceases and other income sources such as room hire disappear too. We need a church that can not only serve the nation and our congregations during this time of crisis, but a church that will also be ready to continue its witness and worship once this crisis passes. We all have a vital role to play over the coming weeks and months to ensure this is possible.

At this early stage none of us knows how long the current measures are likely to last, but without positive action being taken, clergy have told us that this situation is likely to leave debilitating holes in their church finances, making it impossible to cover fixed costs such as insurances, and to continue to pay for local ministry. Some PCCs have even voiced concerns that this crisis may lead to the bankruptcy of their PCC.

Local churches are indeed facing unforeseen and unprecedented challenges and so we would like to ask you to offer leadership at this time by taking the following vital steps to limit these financial repercussions:

1. Look after your treasurers. Some treasurers will feel a huge amount of stress and anxiety around church finances at this time. Please do all you can to reassure them that they are not in this alone. Ric Jaques, Head of Finance, will be in touch with all treasurers in the day or so outlining what support and resources are available to parishes during this crisis.
2. Use your cash reserves. While there is a strong case not to liquidate investments when the market is low, if any of our churches have cash reserves saved for a rainy day, then we can be confident that we are currently in the midst of a monsoon. These reserves can be used to ensure that local church and ministry can continue during the crisis.
3. Communicate with every church member about the impact of church closures on church finances and the steps they can take to help. Even if we are not meeting together on a Sunday morning, we are still part of the body of Christ and should be committed to the continued life of the church. Please remind those who do not give by standing order and so are currently unable to give to your church in the normal fashion, that their commitment

and generosity is needed now more than ever before. Carlisle Diocese has produced some resources on how to talk to members sensitively about their commitment to giving in the context of the covid-19 crisis. These resources will very shortly be accessible in the “Finance – Coronavirus Guidance” section of the Diocesan Website:

[www.carlislediocese.org.uk/coronavirus/](http://www.carlislediocese.org.uk/coronavirus/) and advice can be sought from our Stewardship Enabler, Sophie Hodge, on [Sophie.hodge@carlislediocese.org.uk](mailto:Sophie.hodge@carlislediocese.org.uk) or 07988 090 477. We ask every church leader to use these resources now to communicate on church giving, so as to mitigate against serious financial losses.

4. Some of your churches may have CCLA deposit funds you can access. Ric Jaques will be communicating on this soon to treasurers.
5. We ask that your church continues to be fully committed, as far as possible, to making Parish Offer payments, and to maintaining next year’s level of Parish Offer. Our objective is that this crisis will not prevent the Church from maintaining a worshipping presence in every community and we will need your continued generous support if we are to achieve that.
6. We know that all parishes will be facing significant financial challenges at this time, but some of you may be in a position where you are particularly concerned about your future viability and the possibility of bankruptcy. Where this is the case, we encourage you or your treasurer to contact Sophie Hodge (as above), at the earliest possible opportunity so we can discuss ways to help you. We are working as a Diocese and with the National Church to provide mechanisms to support those parishes who need it most.

We appreciate that these measures ask a lot of you and your churches, but in times of uncertainty and crisis we need clear leadership more than ever.

If everyone pulls together, we have no doubt that local churches and the Diocese will be able to remain financially sustainable. We are confidently able to say that Carlisle Diocese is solvent, but like any other “business”, a significant fall in its main source of income – in our case the Parish Offer - would still mean having to take drastic action within a period of months.

Please be assured that everything we are asking you to do as local church, we are also doing ourselves as a Diocese. We want to encourage you that you are not in this alone, and we are working hard to develop ways of supporting our parishes through this testing time. More information will follow on this in the next few days.

In the same way that we are asking you to look to your liquid reserves, the Diocesan Board of Finance is already drawing on its cash reserves in order to keep the local church functioning through this turbulent time. The Board will be doing its utmost to continue to fulfil its financial responsibilities and is already exploring every opportunity both to make savings and to access the Government support that has been announced so far.

We will continue to communicate to you regularly on the financial situation facing the church in Cumbria, as more information becomes available.

These really are extraordinary times to be the local church. We are truly thankful for the way all of you are leading our churches through such unprecedented challenges: pastoral, practical and financial. We have no doubt that our Church is built on a solid foundation and that we will be salt and light in our communities both through the storm of this crisis and once we come out the other side.

Praying that you keep safe and well during this time,

Bishop James Bishop Emma