**Novel Coronavirus Pandemic 2020**

The third mark of mission says that we must **respond to human need with loving service**

 

**God calls us to respond to the needs of others.**

As Christians we might want to engage fully with the third mark of mission in being especially aware of what those around us might need and what we might do to help. What follows are some suggestions for taking care of neighbours and family during national emergencies, when there are restrictions on daily life. Currently, this applies to the evolving situation regarding novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), and especially regarding those people in isolation, shielding or in quarantine and living under conditions where people are required to stay apart, work from home, and stay within small household groups or support bubbles.

**This is NOT advice what to do about novel Coronavirus itself. Please follow government and medical advice and advice from the churches as it changes.**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches#na>

To be of maximum help to people, we should all follow government and medical advice and any advice from the churches. To respond in loving service we should:

**Be sensible**

**Be safe**

**Love our neighbour as ourselves**

Below find suggestions for Christian service to our friends and neighbours in the community:

* Understanding vulnerabilities
* Mental wellbeing
* Spiritual needs
* Practical help

**Overview (September 2020)**

As time has gone on since the emergence of the virus, doctors have discovered that older people and those with underlying health issues and co-morbidities seem to be most vulnerable to the disease. Elderly people living in care homes can be particularly at risk. Some groups, such as BAME groups, and men, can be somewhat more adversely affected than others. However, *everyone* can catch Covid-19 and some people can spread it while not showing any symptoms.

There is some evidence that people can catch the disease more than once and some people struggle to recover from it in a syndrome known as ‘long Covid’ which may leave them feeling exhausted and ill and with associated long-term effects on the body. Until a vaccine is available, measures to contain and control the spread of the virus will be in place.

Autumn and winter are particularly critical times for virus control and measures are in place in the UK from September to try and prevent a second wave resulting in many hospitalisations.

The measures to control and contain the disease may lead to other vulnerabilities of which we should all, as Christians, be aware of. *Everyone* may be vulnerable to some of these issues:

People may be:

* Vulnerable to other disease and problems arising from suspended treatment (not just COVID-19, including people receiving treatment for cancer)
* Vulnerable to anxiety, fear and rumination affecting their mental wellbeing, including long periods of isolation and uncertainty about the future.
* Vulnerable to putting themselves at risk, especially those getting fatigued with virus news and wanting to socialise or enjoy themselves out and about
* Vulnerable to increased loneliness and isolation
* Vulnerable to the loss of social contact on which people depend for their mental wellbeing, especially those who have been separated from partners or other family members, have been furloughed, have lost jobs, or miss being in the office.
* Vulnerable to scammers offering false information or trying to exploit the situation – some people are now more responsive to a ‘friendly’ voice and more inclined to trust without checking
* Vulnerable to desperate behaviour (people with addictions, phobias, sudden stress)
* Vulnerable to increased family tensions and conflict from enforced proximity, perhaps leading to domestic violence. There is also evidence that there are a lot more complaints about neighbours, often about noise, where people are staying at home.

*Times of emergency are times when we can fully respond to God’s call to recognising the needs of others and be responsive to them.*

**Mental wellbeing**

The World Health Organisation has drawn attention to the role of fear and uncertainty in relation to Coronavirus and how the incessant news about it can worry people to excess. We can help with that by:

* Working from home or socialising safely according to current guidelines on going out, but maximising contact with people by whatever ways are possible without going out or taking risks. Be aware of the difficulties faced by people who live in poverty and who may not have a phone or whose internet availability and phone signal is limited in remote rural areas. Some of those people may not be aware of current guidance as it changes.
* Offering reassurance – dealing with people’s fears and worries about what they see and hear about the spread of the disease. Don’t gossip or speculate but keep connecting and talking to those in isolation, so they feel less alone.
* Help people to stay connected by whatever means is appropriate and safe. Some people miss ‘clap for carers’. Allow people to express fears but help them to manage the amount of news they receive or follow. Help people to volunteer for things and feel useful. If people are stuck at home alone, suggest things to help them keep busy and occupied.
* Encourage people to do other things they enjoy as a distraction from continuing virus news. Also encourage people who want to eat out to finish work as early as possible and eat out early and come home early. Given the 10pm cut off time this is a sensible strategy.
* Guiding neighbours and family to reputable sources when they want information but try not to second-guess or to predict the future. There are a lot of myths and misinformation circulating about the virus at the moment and some of them include ideas about protection and cure that can actually be harmful. Fact-check and find good sources to help separate fact from fiction and help people discriminate about that. See this article about misinformation and how it spreads <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-51931394?fbclid=IwAR2wltIOmBXVtX1ckh4fPV_dRJ8xD-H0bz-IBV4yt1yIS8L7L5CFIwgJEb8>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zb23382>

See also this page about myths and misinformation on the World Health Organisation website.

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

* Appropriately sharing your faith and trust in God, and not scaremongering.
* Setting an example by wearing face coverings. Finding ways to communicate a smile and friendliness while wearing the coverings.
* Reassuring that people won’t be left alone and that there is help available that they can trust.
* Protect people against unknown callers and scams. Be available for people to check with you if they are worried about being contacted by strangers.
* Be aware that being effectively shut in with family members for significant periods can lead to rise in family tensions, arguments and physical and mental altercation. If you can do so remotely, offer a safety valve if possible for heightened emotions and tensions and a means of distraction where family tensions are particularly difficult. Where people are getting fed up with their neighbours, encourage them to talk to each other, or find mediators to resolve disputes before resentments and arguments build up.
* Help people plan nice things for the future and positive things to look forward to, including positive things for your church.

**Spiritual needs**

Restrictions on church numbers and safety measures can have a big impact on people for whom church services are a social and spiritual lifeline. Even people who only go to church irregularly may find the idea that they can’t go extremely upsetting. Changes to the numbers of people permitted at the occasional offices, especially when plans for weddings and baptisms have to be changed can cause anxiety and distress, and especially with regard to limitations on family members at funerals. See for example, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-52065003> . Some family and friends may not get the chance to say goodbye in person and the ongoing impact of this on grief and bereavement should not be underestimated.

As fellow members of the Body of Christ we can help alleviate the sense of being cut off from gathering together in church buildings and the sense of loss in not being able to participate personally in the sacraments, by staying in contact as much as possible and helping people navigate online sources of church activity and solidarity. The church buildings may be shut or numbers restricted but the Church must correspondingly be ever more open. Many people are following online services and prayers time and many of those are experiencing ‘church’ for the first time.

* **Prayer:** letting people know they are prayed for and joining with them in prayer at particular times of day. Supporting key workers and decision makers regularly in prayer. You can use <http://www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk/do/PrayerandBlessingduringtheCoronavirusepidemicscreen.pdf.pdf> if you want to.
* **Worship:** helping people who have the facility to join in online worship and streamed services. Contact with loved and trusted clergy can help people feel less anxious and more cared for.
* **Pastoral care and support:** providing ways to talk to members of the clergy and church members about pastoral matters, perhaps by suggesting ways in which people can find a time to talk confidentially and alone even if they are at home with family. There are many resources for spiritual comfort available.
* **Encouragement:** people who are isolated and who also feel uncertain about what God is doing in these times can be encouraged by sharing your faith and honesty. Help people count their blessings and give thanks to God as a counter to fear and uncertainty.
* **Caring for people who are being blamed:** the fear and anxiety about the virus has led to increased hate speech and blame directed against innocent people. We can help by counteracting any narrative of blame and protecting people by showing our care and love for them within our communities.

Check constantly reviewed and updated advice for the Church of England here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches#na>

**If people get ill:**

**Be sensible**

**Be safe**

**Love our neighbour as ourselves**

* Help people who are worried by the track and trace system or worried about giving their details and what might happen to them.
* Provide reassurance. Help people to feel that even if isolated or quarantined they are not forgotten about and that they are not alone.
* Help people understand what will happen if a person has to go to hospital. Find out current advice about visitors, precautions and practical impact on family and friends.
* Provide support for those worried and distressed if a member of the family is ill and they cannot easily visit or stay with them.
* Pray for all involved in caring for people in hospital, care homes and hospices and who are feeling especially stressed at the moment.
* Pray for all involved in funerals and the difficulties posed by reduced numbers at funeral services and the problems of social distancing in giving and receiving comfort.

**Practical help**

We can all can help in a number of ways:

* Checking people are ok by phone or by a visual check from outside. Some people are putting green or red (traffic light) cards in their window to indicate if they are ok or need help, though this can also make them vulnerable to scammers. Remember to keep safe by **2 metre social distancing** if you are outside for any reason. Has anything changed? Are people coping? What partners in your community might be able to help if people are in difficulty or not coping with the situation?
* Link into any street Facebook groups or other social media networks for local parts of the community. Use these networks to flag up issues or find out who is doing what to be aware of neighbours. This will help identify areas of particular need and prevent duplication of resources if for example, food, medicine or medical help needs to be delivered (see about the volunteer service above).
* Find good, up to date information about the current health advice as it changes. Help people to navigate NHS contact and the 111 system if necessary. People who do not speak English particularly well or who are worried or confused about the system may need support to get medical advice and assistance. This includes video appointments with nurses and GPs.
* Food – shopping (shopping rings are where people go to the shops, and if they can’t get items ask the next person to look out for them when they go shopping. This cuts down on trips and burdens and stops overbuying).
* Medication – see if you can help with collecting and delivering prescriptions where the collection is essential (see volunteer service above).
* Water – remind people to drink enough. Dehydration can lead to confusion and falls. Some people are drinking more alcohol than usual as well.
* Exercise – remind people that they need to move even if self-isolating or completely stuck indoors. Suggest ways to move and stretch at home or where to go safely for a short walk for fresh air.
* Domestic pets – need walking and care; farm animals need consistent attention. All may need help to get veterinary attention. Some people are worried that their pets could be sources of infection but there is currently **no evidence** that the virus can be passed on by domestic pets. Just encourage hand washing as good practice anyway. The requests for puppies has gone up hugely as people have tried to get pets for companions or as ‘excuses’ for leaving the house during lockdown. Pet charities are worried about a huge influx of abandoned animals down the line.
* Cleaning - hygiene and sanitation. Remind people about advice to wash hands frequently with soap, wear face coverings when in shops and hospitality venues and not to touch their faces. Encourage people to dispose of used masks safely and set an example for this.
* Health support – watching for risk factors and being vigilant. Some people may forget about hygiene instructions or how to take proper care of themselves if they are distracted by the situation.
* Being aware of increased impact on homeless people, people with uncontrolled addictions, self-employed people and people working in the gig economy who now cannot work, people reliant on food banks, people working at home with children. Look for partners in your community and local area who may be focussing on these areas of social need and who may be able to offer targeted help. (See suggested resources, below).
* Some people are feeling useful and helping by sewing things like scrub bags to help the NHS and making masks for people. Creative crafts and contributions like this can raise morale of both givers and receivers. Other people, inspired by the example of Captain Sir Tom, have found ways to carry out challenges indoors and raise money for charities.

*Taking care of our neighbours helps to keep us all safe and healthy.*

**When the emergency is over:**

There will be continued need when the pandemic is **over** and we should be responsive to that. For many people this period will have been intensely traumatic, especially those who have caught and recovered from COVID-19; those still struggling with long Covid; frontline health workers; children missing school and their friendship groups; and those who will have suffered economically and whose situations may have been drastically altered. **We will need, more than ever, to respond with loving service**, not just assume everything has gone back to how it was.

It will be good to reflect on what we have learned about taking care of neighbours and friends. Why should we stop? God’s call to loving service and social justice is unending. If you have formed useful and holy habits from being responsive to need, keep doing it. Loving service is one of the most positive ways we can love God and show our faith to others.

**Lessons for us all to learn:**

**Be sensible -**

Do not buy more than you need

Do not put yourself at needless exposure and risk

**Be safe** – be wary of strangers and people making promises. Check.

Do not act against authoritative advice from medical professional, government guidance etc

Don’t listen to scaremongering and conspiracy theories which might encourage you to put yourself and others at risk.

**Love our neighbour as ourselves**

Know that we CAN respond safely and compassionately with loving service in the name of Jesus, and that we WILL do so forever.

See resources below

**Some Resources:**

**Coronavirus information:** there is a WhatsApp group created by the government for people to ask questions. To use the free GOV.UK Coronavirus Information Service on WhatsApp, simply add 07860 064422 in your phone contacts and then message the word ‘hi’ in a WhatsApp message to get started.

**Guidance for churches (Church of England)** <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches>

<https://anglicanalliance.org/covid-19-resources-hub/>

**Prayer at home**:

<https://oikodomeo.home.blog/2020/03/17/resources-for-prayer-when-public-worship-is-not-possible/?fbclid=IwAR0nZypvczxNzvrOKX2MpPa91rFW5qpqoI5PjIu4_Kp-SV-EOPcwka72bP4>

<https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/12590/isolated-but-not-alone-resources-for-catholics>

<https://ctbi.org.uk/calls-to-prayer-for-coronavirus-pandemic/>

**All age resources:**

<https://www.illustratedministry.com/flattenthecurve?fbclid=IwAR0oWC_P5PAl2hJ0NoqHnl1pkpy3Sj_kno043Tef2pmWCPAhuWUW1afsYDo>

**Reflection:** <https://canonjjohn.com/2020/03/18/comfort-in-covidia/>

**Mental Health:** <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak/while-working>

**MIND** (for support with mental health issues): <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/#collapse27d03>

**Children’s Society** (For supporting young people with mental health issues) <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/coronavirus-information-and-support>

**Citizens Advice** (advice on a range of issues such as debt, finance, work, family, benefits, etc, available from a local branch through <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>) ; <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/health/coronavirus-what-it-means-for-you/>

**Age UK** (support for those who are older and vulnerable): <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/> Campaign to End Loneliness: <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/blog/coronavirus-and-social-isolation/>

**Action for Happiness:** <https://www.actionforhappiness.org/news/covid-19-how-to-respond>

**The Trussell Trust** (for information about local foodbanks): <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/charities-warn-coronavirus-will-hit-vulnerable-as-some-foodbanks-struggle-for-supplies.html>

**Crisis** (for information about how to support homelessness people): <https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/latest-news/crisis-calls-for-emergency-measures-to-protect-people-facing-homelessness-in-the-coronavirus-outbreak/>

**Coronavirus and domestic abuse** – the government has issued advice and sources of help and support if being at home puts you at risk of abuse <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-and-domestic-abuse>

**Teaching:** John and Olive Drane have a resource for how to offer online teaching called ‘Coronavirus, online teaching & learning in the immediate crisis’. Contact anne.richards@churchofengland.org for a copy of their popular PDF on this.

**Spirituality:** From isolation to invitation <https://www.facebook.com/groups/666388910847014/>