

Dear Sisters and Brothers

This last year has not been like anything else we have experienced in our lifetimes. In 2020 our churches closed abruptly after the Third Sunday of Lent and we were unable to keep Holy Week and celebrate Easter together. Since then, we have found ways of worshipping together online and using our websites, email, post and telephone to try to keep in touch with as many people as possible. It has been a difficult and challenging time for everyone.

Many people in our communities have now received their first vaccination and a few have even had their second. The government has published its plan for the gradual ending of lockdown restrictions and we are all glimpsing light at the end of the tunnel. It is vital that we all play our part in observing the restrictions that remain in place over the next few weeks so that infection rates can be kept under control and everyone can be protected, including those who have not yet been vaccinated.

Our PCC Standing Committees have therefore decided not to re-open our churches for public worship until we reach step two of the government spring plan. If step two begins, as planned, on 12th April, we will hold services on 18th April at St Luke's, Great Braxted and Inworth, with services at Messing beginning the following Sunday and the midweek Communion Service at St Luke's beginning on Thursday 22nd April. Sunday Club will also re-start on 18th April. If the government delays step two, then we will also delay re-opening.

I know that many of you will be disappointed not to be in church for Easter. I share this disappointment, but I believe the decision we have made is the best one for everyone's safety, especially considering the number of people who would be likely to come to services on Easter Day. We have put together a programme of online and outdoor services for Holy Week and Easter and we will continue to post resources on our websites and in the actual post.

When we re-open it is essential that we observe all Covid-19 safety requirements in our churches and I would ask everyone to co-operate fully with this, please. You will need to book for services in all four churches. We expect that we may have more people wishing to come to St Luke's than we can safely accommodate, so you will not be able to book for more than one Sunday at a time unless you have a specific role to play in the service. This is so that everyone who wishes to come has a chance to do so. If you are unable to book a place one Sunday, you will be given priority for the following Sunday. You will also be welcome to book for one of the other churches if you are able to travel and there is space.

Face coverings will be required at all services. This must be a mask that fits closely over your nose and mouth. Scarves and plastic face shields are not an acceptable alternative. Everyone will be asked to use hand sanitiser on arrival and on leaving and we will need to keep a contact phone number for 21 days for NHS Test and Trace purposes. Social distancing will need to be observed at all times. This means you will not be able to sit with people outside your household

or mix with them while in church. Please do not bring anything to hand out to other people (eg cards, rotas) as you will not be able to do this. Any messages, including church rotas, should be sent by email or put through people's doors. The letter rack at St Luke's will not be in use. The news sheet will continue to be sent out by email. A small number of copies will be printed for those with no internet access.

Please also resist the temptation to stop and chat to others in the church entrance or the aisle before or after the service. You will be able to chat outside the church in groups of 6. When we reach step three, you will be able to sit with one other household in church. I know it is easy to forget, especially when you haven't seen your friends for a long time, but please do help us out by keeping to the restrictions and respecting the instructions of the churchwardens, stewards and ministry team. If we are not able to keep well within the requirements of the law, we will have no option but to suspend services again. It should go without saying that verbal abuse and aggression towards any of our clergy, lay ministers, churchwardens or stewards is not acceptable.

For those of you who are not able to come to church, I will be resuming home visits and Home Communion once I have been vaccinated and pose less of a risk to you. We hope to be able to livestream the Sunday service from St Luke's if we can resolve the current technical problems and we intend to continue a midweek online service for as long as we are able to and there is demand.

I am very much looking forward to seeing you in church again. You have all been much in my thoughts and prayers and I am grateful to you for your prayers for me.

May God bless us all as we continue to worship and serve at home, in our church buildings and in the wider community.

Anne-Marie