

19 July 2020

Dear friends,

Last week the First Minister announced that various public places were allowed to reopen from Wednesday, 15th of July. Included in the list were hairdressers/barbers and places of worship. On Friday this week I was down at Wiseguys, the barbers in Kintore, for a haircut yet on Sunday morning we still had an online church service via Zoom while our church buildings remained locked. Perhaps you are wondering why the hairdressers are open but the church building is not. You won't be the only one. I thought it would be helpful to explain what the current situation is and why, despite the First Minister's announcement, we have not yet opened the church buildings.

For illustration, let's compare and contrast our situation with that of the lovely ladies down at Wiseguys. There are firstly many things about reopening that we share with them:

- We are both limited by numbers. They are allowed 4 customers at a time in their building, we are limited to 20 people at a time in ours.
- Like them, we might need to take your temperature before you enter and turn you away if you showed any symptoms of Covid-19.
- Like them, we would require you to wear a mask while you were in the building, sanitise your hands on entry, keep a 2m distance from everyone else, touch as few surfaces as possible, follow the clearly marked signage and pass through the building in a single file, single direction flow.
- Like them we are required to keep a record of your presence and contact details to comply with Government Test and Protect arrangements. But, unlike them, we would need much stricter controls over that data since religious affiliation is regarded by law as not just personal but also sensitive information.
- Like them we would have to implement a very strict cleaning regime to ensure that the building is properly sanitised before you enter and after you leave.
- They have on display a certificate declaring that they have complied with the requisite codes in order to be allowed to open. Similarly, we would have to follow a process of certification involving a 55-page guideline document, risk assessments, safety checklist followed by application to and approval from Presbytery (our regional governing body).

All of these measures are manageable and our Property team has done a terrific job during the lockdown of keeping abreast of regulations and guidance as they have changed (and they have changed often!) and preparing our building and our systems so that we are becoming ready to open if we needed to. But that brings us to the second thing to consider: Do we need to open our buildings? And this is where there are some differences between the church and other organisations, like the barbers for example.

Firstly, you will appreciate from the above that a reopened church under these guidelines would be very different from what we are accustomed to. Limited numbers; sitting far apart on designated seats (without cushions); no singing allowed; and no fellowship before or afterwards. Much more important though is the fact that, whereas the hairdressers need their building to operate, we can perform much of our mission outwith our building. To have my haircut I need a comb and scissors to touch my head and there needs to be a person on the other end of the comb and scissors. By contrast, let's consider the church's main areas of activity. Over the past few years we identified three particular areas of focus for our life as a church community. These are discipleship, hospitality and mission.

By **Discipleship** we mean the nurturing and development of people's faith. We do this through prayer, study and the practice of spiritual disciplines (such as silence, Sabbath-keeping, etc.). Through our website, Facebook pages, online presence and pastoral care contacts we have tried to provide our members with the tools to keep their discipleship alive and growing. By **Hospitality** we mean to provide worship and fellowship that is inviting to all – especially strangers. Of course this is much easier to do when you have a building to which you can invite people. Nevertheless, our pastoral care team has been hard at work keeping connected with those who are less likely to

connect with us online, while through our online church services, Facebook Live chats and Zoom services we have not only stayed connected with many folks and offered regular opportunities for worship – we have actually reached quite a large number of new folk who have not been connected with us in the past but have now felt invited and welcomed into fellowship with us (albeit remotely). Finally, **Mission** involves all the places where we are connected to our community. Our support of Christian Aid, Toilet Twinning and the Aberdeenshire North Foodbank have continued during lockdown and we have used this time to strengthen ties with local community groups such as the Community Council, Rotary, Youth organisations etc. as well as to get involved in new ventures such as the Lend a Hand Kintore group.

So, while our buildings may be closed, the church is most certainly open, active and alive!

May I therefore also take this opportunity to thank you for the way that you are keeping the church open active and alive, by your care for one another and your care for our community.

As to the buildings, we see funerals (and weddings) as the first priority for reopening. We aim to reopen in whatever limited way we are allowed for such events towards the end of August. We will keep an eye on regulations and advice from both the Scottish Government and the Church of Scotland and in September we will reassess the possibility of opening for other purposes too. Meanwhile, our activities continue as listed above.

With much love,

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