



18 March 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

First of all, in everything that is going on, let us remember that our God is sovereign, and that we can *absolutely* rely on his promises that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” and that “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:28, 38-39).

You will all be aware of the current Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. We are monitoring the government’s guidance for minimising the spread of the disease and protecting those who are most vulnerable. In the light of the statement from the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, at Monday’s press conference, and a clarifying statement by the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, in Parliament on Monday 16 March, **we have decided to suspend all our services and fellowship meetings for at least the next four weeks**. We are not alone in making this difficult decision. As the situation unfolds, we will review this, and as soon as the Government’s health and scientific advisors recommend that public and social gatherings should be permitted to resume, we will restart our regular weekly services.

Of course, this will make ministry and fellowship very different for the coming weeks. We will do everything we can as elders to encourage fellowship in whatever practical form that may take.

In particular:

- Sunday worship and preaching
  - We are not currently in a position to “live stream” Oakwood services; this is something we may be able to invest in if it becomes clear that the Government’s recommendation against public gatherings is going to be prolonged.
  - In the mean time, there are a number of other excellent UK-based churches which do have live-stream facilities. For example, both Carey Baptist church (<https://www.careybaptistchurch.org.uk/>) and Westminster Chapel (<https://www.westminsterchapel.org.uk/>), which are other FIEC churches, live-

stream their Sunday services and will be continuing to do so during the Coronavirus outbreak.

- Prayer

- We can *absolutely* pray individually, of course.
- We can also pray in groups, using Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp or other online options.
- We will continue meeting “virtually” on Friday evenings and start doing so on Saturday mornings and also resume our Tuesday evening prayer meeting “virtually”. We’ll make sure that everyone receives clear instructions on what computer software or phone apps they would need to install, and how to access each of these meetings.
- In order to include those who don’t have access to online options, we will produce a weekly hard-copy prayer bulletin and distribute it to everyone in the church who does not have internet access.

- Practical needs

- As well as praying for one another, keeping in contact with one another – whether by phone or online – is important so that we can be aware of each other’s practical needs.
- Over the weeks ahead it is very likely that some in the church will have to “self-isolate” because they are showing potential symptoms of Coronavirus, even if it turns out to be a false alarm. If that happens, we must do all we can to provide practical support for those who are quarantined.
- We must be especially mindful of those who are most vulnerable – whether because of their age, or because they have other health conditions that put them at greater risk of either contracting the disease if they are exposed to it, or of experiencing more severe symptoms.
- We must bear in mind that it is *those* most vulnerable individuals who are also most likely *not* to have internet access, and so are most likely to “slip through the net” if we rely exclusively on a WhatsApp group for keeping in touch, for example.

We will communicate more over the coming days, as our plans firm up.

Please do make sure that Martin or Sam are aware of any concerns you may have regarding the Coronavirus situation, and of course any pastoral issues or matters for prayer.

Yours in Christ

Martin Biddiscombe

On behalf of the elders of Oakwood Chapel