



September 2020

The Reopening of Church Buildings for worship in the Oldham and Saddleworth Circuit

I am the recipient of a lot of comment, some criticism and a few complaints concerning the reopening of churches for worship in the Oldham and Saddleworth Circuit. It is clear from these communications that there is a great capacity for division being generated by the decisions being made by the churches across the Circuit concerning the reopening of buildings for worship. Some people are frustrated that the church that they would usually attend remains closed whilst others are frustrated that, in the face of continued local issues with Covid-19, their church building is opening for worship. Some people are frustrated that, whilst their church building remains closed, other Methodist Churches in the Circuit are open. Some people are frustrated that, whilst their Methodist Church remains closed, ecumenical neighbours have been open for worship for some time.

We need to be clear where the responsibility for deciding on the opening of our church building lies. The responsibility is with the local managing trustees, that is the Church Council in each local church. The moral and legal responsibility for making the decision to open the building or to keep it closed lies firmly in that place. As Superintendent Minister of the Circuit it is not my place, nor do I have the power, to direct what each of those Church Councils should decide. Some people are looking for me to issue a circuit policy and to instruct colleagues as to the decision they should individually make and reach for in the meetings of the Church Councils. The established rights and responsibilities of the Superintendent Minister do not lead me to agree with such a manner of working. I do, however, want to support and strengthen the voice of my colleagues who are individually holding pastoral responsibility for the churches across the Circuit. I am conscious that there are differences between them in terms of their responses and how they are feeling about the reopening of churches for worship. What I would ask each member of the Church Council in each of our churches across the Oldham & Saddleworth Circuit to do is to recognise the position of the minister who has pastoral responsibility in each place. Please seek, and acknowledge, their opinion in this matter and recognise that the granting of decision to members of the church council does reduce the ability of your minister to reach a different decision. They are all seeking to do the right thing and are as frustrated as you are by the situation. There is not a Minister in the land who would not love to be back working in the manner that we were before March. Not all of the Ministers in the Oldham & Saddleworth Circuit feel that the time is yet right to reopen our buildings for worship and not all of them are comfortable with leading worship, no matter how socially distanced, in our church buildings whilst the present local situation continues. I ask for kindness and pastoral sensitivity to be shown to my colleagues at this time.

None of this means, of course, that I do not have an opinion on what I believe to be the appropriate action that our church councils should be taking. I would like to challenge each member of the church council in each of the churches of the Oldham & Saddleworth Circuit to give due consideration to the local and national situation regarding Covid-19. It is clear that we remain in a situation of concern as a nation and we are located in an area of special concern. Greater Manchester is an area in which Covid-19 cases continue to rise by the day

and within that area Oldham is high on the list of places where they continue to rise even more swiftly. The reproduction rate (the so-call R number) remains well above 1 and local hospitals are seeing a return to admission in significant numbers. The guidance as it presently stands is that we should not be engaging in meeting with anyone from outside our own household or bubble, either in or out of the house. The 'rule of 6' does not apply to Oldham. We are told that we should not use public transport except for essential purposes. Connexional guidance holds fast to the suggestion that people with underlying health issues, are over 70 years of age or are otherwise susceptible to infection, should be very cautious about returning to worship in our church buildings. I do know that people are confused by the apparent contradictions in the Government guidance, especially as relate to the permission to engage in social and leisure activities, but I would suggest that such guidelines are related to the need to get the economy going rather than any consideration about the health implications of such activities. Just because you *may* does not mean that you *should* engage in such activities. Some people are saying that we have members of our churches who cannot access the online worship that is being produced week by week and are, therefore, feeling deprived of spiritual support. I would suggest that the majority of such people are those older members of our churches who really ought to be cautious about attending public worship in our buildings anyway!

I do understand the frustrations, but it is my opinion that we really should be holding back just a little longer and seeing what happens with the resurgence of the Covid-19 infections over the next few weeks.

With kindest regards and best wishes,



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Superintendent Minister

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