

26<sup>th</sup> March 2020

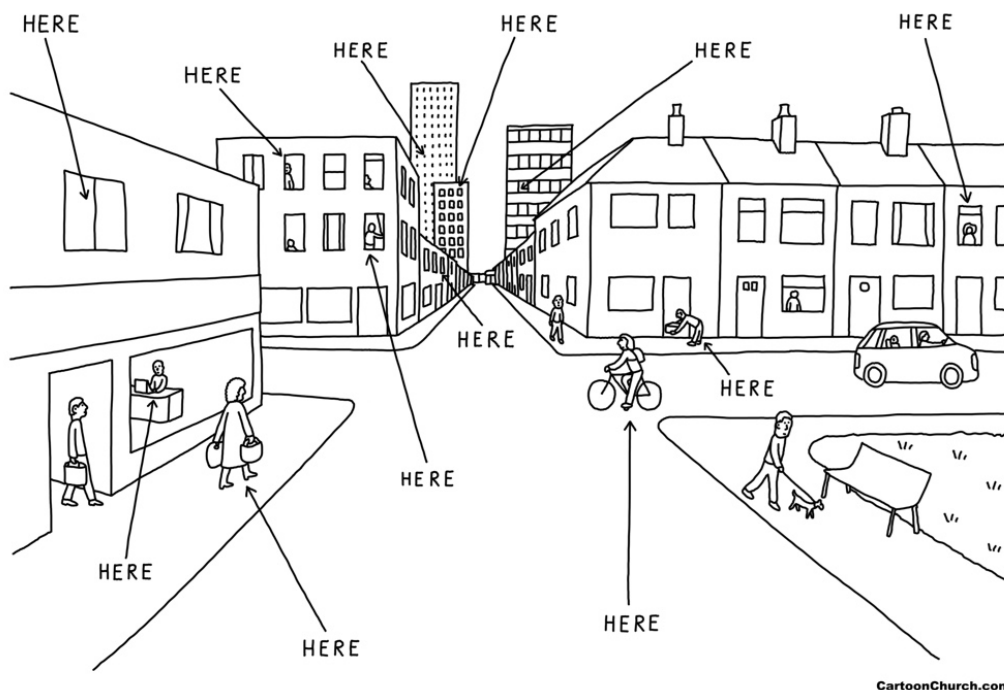
Dear friends,

Government announcements over the last couple of days have clearly changed life for virtually everyone in the country in ways we could not have imagined just a few weeks ago. As churches and synod, this means practical changes, which we have shared and continue to update.

I've been hearing some really interesting ways in which congregations are responding to the current situation. At this stage, rather than sharing more administrative matters, I want to encourage you all to consider ways in which we can continue to 'BE' the church at this time when we are freed up from our normal pattern. Our church buildings may be unavailable to use, but our churches, the people, are not.

I'm grateful to the cartoonist Dave Walker, who has made this picture freely available for reproduction. It's a good reminder of where the church is.

## WHERE THE CHURCH IS



Perhaps you might consider church life in this 'lockdown' situation with an eye to the 'Five Marks of Mission' - Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform and Treasure.

## Tell

This is not the time to start preaching on street corners, or knocking on doors, but the opportunities to recognise what your faith means, and to share that with friends and family are there. In 1 Peter we are told to “be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you”. We need to be those people of hope, even in such uncertain times, and willing to **tell** those who ask us about our faith why we believe, and what difference it makes to us.

## Teach

One of the things that is happening around our churches is that Bible study is happening in new ways. WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype (other apps are available too) are all being used for small groups to learn together. Daily Devotions, and livestreamed worship are also available. All sorts of Christian organisations are providing material online too. I know that not everyone is able to connect digitally, but many octogenarians are as computer savvy as younger folk. Those who can't connect from a computer or smartphone can be included too.

Schools are providing 'lessons' for their children – don't forget the young people from your church. The CYDOs will be happy to suggest ideas for them. Perhaps we've got used to seeing the '**teach**' part of mission as being to do with a sermon. Theology simply means 'God talk'. Let's do some theology, and all be teachers and learners.

## Tend

The first thing that many churches have done is to ensure that their pastoral care system (often elders' pastoral lists) is working by telephone. That's a great start. I hope that no-one who is part of our congregations has not had some contact. Perhaps one of our strengths is how we **tend** those who are a part of the church. In these troubled times, we need to concentrate not only on the 'insiders' but those who are not connected with the church. Members in the older age group who may have been very active in the church's work with vulnerable people have been told to remain at home. As well as talking with each other, perhaps each of us could make sure that we contact friends and neighbours beyond the church. The NHS volunteer scheme is looking for home based people as well as mobile ones. Local areas – even streets – are setting up support schemes. Get involved – **tend** those around you even if you can't see them.

Whilst many of our buildings are out of use for the time being, some work is continuing in them which is vital. Whilst local, small scale projects are not able to continue, foodbanks are still needed, but must be run under strict guidelines. Some pre-schools continue to offer care for the children of key workers. Homelessness projects are having to work differently, but are vital in providing support for one of the most vulnerable groups. We are also aware that some churches are being asked about the possibility of their buildings being made available for storage of vital supplies.

If your buildings are being used for anything of this nature, it's really important to ensure the safety of users and staff/volunteers. Please get in touch with Stuart – one of his main current priorities is to ensure that where buildings are being used, you get the right support and advice.

All of this is about **tending** for those around us. Can I also ask that you make sure that you look after those who are looking after you. Make sure that ministers and church secretaries are looked after too. They are working in uncharted waters, and it's not easy.

### **Transform**

Whatever your political persuasion, the Bible tells us to "pray for those in authority". Governments, civil servants, business leaders... so many people need our prayers at this time. But we are also called to challenge unjust structures and work for a better, fairer world.

To **transform** at this time will involve both support and challenge. Adding our voices to those who are working for better support for those in the most need both in this country and worldwide is vital, alongside changing things on a small scale. Making sure that through our spending we don't support companies or countries who profit through exploitation.

### **Treasure**

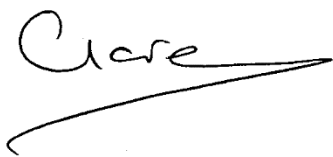
One of the unexpected effects of the virus is that the environment is changing. Less flights and heavy industry have led to better air quality. There are dolphins in Venice canals. We're called to **treasure** our world, to care for it. This has been a wake up call for us to look at the ways in which we work, and the effects we have on the planet. Don't let all that be lost when we return to 'normal'.

If you are able to get outside for your one permitted bit of exercise then use the time to appreciate the wonder of the world. If you are stuck inside, then watch the birds outside. Even the solitary cactus on my study windowsill is a wonder of creation to be treasured. As the psalmist reminds us, "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it".

Our buildings may be out of use for the time being, but the church is alive and open. We are the church, and are called to build God's kingdom here and now. One traditional ending to worship is the instruction to "Go out into the world, to love and serve...". Perhaps we should adapt it for this moment in time to "Stay in - but love and serve..."

The church is not closed!

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Clare". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Clare Downing