

Easing the lockdown – first weekly review, Monday 13 July

Reminder of the three stages

Stage One Sunday services continue to be broadcast live online from Station House. In addition, 'Covid-safe' services may be held increasingly in any or all of the four churches as attendance at such services increases.

Stage Two The start date for Stage Two will depend on the number choosing to attend 'Covid-safe' services in Stage One. In Stage Two, 'Covid-safe' services will be held in one or more of our churches each Sunday. The 10.45am service will be broadcast live online from inside one of the churches. The continuing use of pre-recorded inserts will ensure that those who are choosing (or required) not to attend will still have the opportunity to take part. These will be shown on a screen in church, as well as being included in the live online broadcast, so that everyone can continue to feel fully involved in the worship life of the four parishes.

Stage Three We will move to Stage Three when all Covid-19-related self-isolation has ended. In Stage Three, Sunday worship will resume without restriction. The live online broadcast of at least one service each Sunday, from inside church, can be continued indefinitely, for the benefit of the housebound, and any others who may appreciate the opportunity that it provides.

Reflections on the beginning of Stage One last Wednesday

The possibility of over-crowding had been a concern, but in the event was not a problem. Eleven people attended the 10am service in Hornby. The service will be repeated this week, to see whether attendance is up, or down, or much the same. The other services were poorly attended (three, three, and two, respectively).

The low attendance figures across all four churches (compared to current levels of engagement with the online Sunday services) may show that there is currently very little demand for services in church. Equally it may be that people object to services which are not on Sundays, and that more would come if services were on Sundays. Either way, we do not yet have enough information to support a move to Stage Two based on our criteria (that a desire by a sufficient number to be back in church should have been demonstrated, to make it possible to go ahead without harming unity).

Additional problems identified with any possible move to Stage Two

Two (further) major challenges have been identified in relation to any move to Stage Two.

The first is the technical challenge of creating the 'hybrid' event proposed for Stage Two. Even straightforward live-broadcasting from inside church is a challenge (the attempt on Wednesday failed with unacceptable audio quality). The challenges can be met, but will be highly dependent on the availability on every occasion of specific individuals and equipment (which may be intrusive).

The second challenge is seating capacity.

We previously had an average of 60 households joining us live online each Sunday. We could not fit even half this many households into any of our buildings under current social distancing regulations. This number has fallen off sharply over the last two weeks. I had feared that people were finally 'losing interest', but Simon has pointed out that, with the easing of the lockdown, there are suddenly other distractions available: travel, visits to relatives, shopping, sport, and other activities. We may be looking at only having to accommodate about 50 households, which is slightly less than twice our capacity (in the larger churches).

Options we might need to consider include:

- ticketing [Lancaster Priory, amongst others, is using ticketing]
- running the service twice, one after the other, in the same location
- running the service in two buildings simultaneously, using Zoom technology and large screens (requires technical equipment and technicians in two locations simultaneously)
- compulsory face masks for so-called 'one-metre-plus' social distancing, instead of two-metre distancing [Saint Mary's Hornby, amongst others, is requiring face-coverings]

To gain further useful information...

A 'one-off' open-air service has been planned for this coming Sunday, with compulsory ticketing. A large turnout will demonstrate that there is a demand to be back together in person on Sundays, and that it is possible for people to engage with a ticketing system. A show of hands might be used to determine whether those who have gathered would be equally happy to gather indoors. We may not find out decisively this weekend whether there are others who would have been happy to meet indoors (but who were not happy to meet outdoors); a subsequent 'one-off' ticketed indoor service might demonstrate this one way or the other.

Longer term (Stage Three)

Over-crowding is less likely to be a problem in Whittington, Arkholme, and Gressingham, than in Hornby (unless, of course, Hornby people cross to the North side of the river because services are being offered there and not in Hornby).

Hornby: Stage Three will be some estimation of 'back to normal' (with evolutionary enhancements based on what has been learned during lockdown), plus live broadcasting online (without pre-recorded inserts). This requires basic livestream equipment (possibly just a laptop with a decent microphone). We do not know when singing will be allowed, and it may still be necessary to run the service twice to deal with numbers, but neither of these constraints need delay a move to Stage Three if the vast majority of our members have chosen to return to the building.

Northern Parishes: Whittington and Arkholme have already combined into a single congregation. With very low numbers in Gressingham, and reduced numbers of available ministers (Sister Judith has completed her training placement with us), it may be necessary to look again at the service pattern in the northern parishes. Across the benefice, there can only practically be one 9.30am service, not just because of the availability of ministers, but because of low numbers.

Benefice: It is not practical to have two services in different venues on any Sunday morning during Stage One or Stage Two, because of the preparation required for the complex live broadcast with pre-recorded inserts. Also, there has been a great sense of unity during lockdown, which would naturally point towards more United Benefice services; but it should be noted that historically so far these have been poorly supported in terms of numbers attending.

Each parish in turn: Resuming Sunday worship in any parish church of the four requires the availability of duty wardens, sidespersons, refreshments teams (once these are permitted), and scripture readers, with sufficient of each to cover for absence. (In addition each parish needs a rota organiser, cleaners, churchyard/garden maintenance teams, building maintenance support, someone to look after the linen, a PCC secretary, and a treasurer.)

Michael Hampson, 13 July 2020