



Dear church family

I watched Boris Johnson's latest press conference from a treadmill in the gym yesterday. It dawned on me that this was going to be my last trip to the gym for a long time. I briefly considered cancelling my gym membership but then decided I would leave it open – I don't want redundancies to hit the staff there if that can be avoided. I walked home via Tesco's (which was a somewhat disturbing experience) and rang Marilyn to start making decisions about church activities.

It now seems clear that all churches will need to close their doors and cease other 'face-to-face' activities. Under normal circumstances I would energetically defy a government that tried to enforce such a thing but it is clear that this decision is based upon a righteous and wise desire to preserve the health of the people and particularly those at most risk of this awful virus. For this reason, we will comply with the government's wishes both in the spirit and the letter of what they are asking for. All church activities that involve people in physical proximity will cease immediately until further notice. As you can imagine, I have made this decision with a very heavy heart.

My guess is that this island has been home to weekly corporate Christian worship ever since Christianity made its way here during the Roman occupation. It is no small thing for it to cease even if only for a short time – particularly when the church needs comfort and encouragement and those outside desperately need the comfort of the gospel.

Did I say that churches need to close their doors? Not quite true – not true at all in fact! Churches must close the doors **of their buildings**. As we all know the church is not to be equated with the building and here is where this oft-quoted truth needs to be applied with determination and creativity.

There are several questions running through my mind

- how do we continue to love God and neighbour whilst being unable to meet physically?
- how do we 'build community' without meeting together?
- how can we not only survive as a church but thrive under these difficult circumstances?
- how can we provide meaningful and heartfelt pastoral care without physical presence?

The pastors met together today to pray and start discussing these profound questions. Be assured that it is our intention to prayerfully develop creative and meaningful answers to these questions over the next few days. We will keep you informed as we go. Please pray for us and be prepared to experience church in a new way. In the meantime, don't hesitate

to get in touch if you've any concerns or need some help – the church staff team stand ready to assist you and try to answer your questions.

A parting thought: I feel a strong sense that we must approach this strange and disturbing time as an opportunity for our church to grow and be renewed. The history of the Church reveals that we tend to grow complacent with comfort and thrive under pressure. Times of suffering and struggle often renew the church, stripping away those things that are unimportant and focusing our attention and energy on the things that matter. What might the Lord teach Purley Baptist Church over the coming days? How might we be renewed in the love of God and neighbour?

With much love

James