

## COVID CHURCH CLOSURES

Living through history sounds grand but often isn't. Covid stories may be dramatic for the grandchildren of today's children, but the reality is much bleaker for many: education disrupted, careers crashed, businesses bust. And the wall to wall media coverage has expanded our vocabulary: R-number, lockdown, pandemic, self-isolating, and plenty of slang, including the self-explanatory "covidiot".

In the midst, most citizens – and it is huge majority – are doing their best to comply with safety. I was in Stourport just the day before writing this walking up the High Street towards Specsavers: there was a significant flow of vehicles, but very few pedestrians among boarded-up businesses and many closed shops. Many were wearing masks in the street, and people were acknowledging others with their eyes while stepping aside. Three youths greeted me with 'hello mister' while stepping into the road to offer me safe distance.

I might wonder how things have changed by the time people read this article?

Our medical services, teachers and social services, law enforcement and goodness knows who else are all doing their best in highly demanding times, as are many volunteers and neighbours. And people of faith communities are highly motivated to contribute to others' wellbeing. Of course, this includes people of different faiths, but I can only speak for the local Christians who, as far as I can see, are doing so many good things in the communities where we live: praying for and checking on neighbours, collecting prescriptions, organising deliveries, and we have been providing services of prayer and church worship for those who need them, but sadly this last practice has to stop for the time being.

In previous lockdowns, the government classed church as 'leisure' and forced us to close. There was an outcry – albeit it a measured, graciously expressed one of course – as not even clergy were allowed to enter their church buildings for prayer. And Church, we argued, is related to many people's mental and spiritual well-being. We are part of the helping services, not some kind of hobby. So this time round, the government has not forced the closure of church buildings, but left it for the faith communities to decide for the best.

And this time, the local church council representatives, have decided, reluctantly, that it is simple unwise and too risky to organise gathered events of any kind, no matter how carefully orchestrated. We discussed many aspects to this, including the vulnerability of many church volunteers themselves. I was impressed by the care shown by local church councils' members who addressed the matter with great thoughtfulness and wisdom. The decision to close the buildings is not taken lightly, nor because we are afraid, but because we celebrate and value human life. We can still conduct funeral and/or burial services, subject to keen safety constraints, and emergency only weddings & baptisms. Churchyards remain open for local individuals to use.

While the church buildings are closed, the Church itself (ie. the people) is very much alive, and open, and here to serve and pray for the community.

Do contact us if you think we may be service.

Please stay safe, and act to keep others safe,

Yours,  
Rev Ted