



Sir Peter Bottomley MP

Member of Parliament for Worthing West
House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

23 May 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

OPENING CHURCHES DURING COVID-19

Church leaders and the Government know many MPs want further faster opening of churches and places of worship.

We ask for clear guidance, rules removed and discretion allowed as local faith leaders stay alert and make churches, chapels and places of prayer and worship available to the faithful. Everyone understands the value of appropriate social distancing and the obligation to avoid contamination.

Catholic metropolitan archbishops in England and Wales have been preparing a phased return to travelling and gathering, respecting advice from health authorities. Their recent statement indicated buildings must be closed “until the restriction applied by the Government are lifted”.

For the Church of England, the Bishop of London Dame Sarah Mullally led the discussion in the House of Bishops. They agreed in principle to phasing the lifting of restrictions in parallel with the Government’s approach, starting with very limited access to church buildings such as private prayer by clergy, subsequently adding “access for some rites and ceremonies when allowed by law”, and then worship services with limited congregations “when Government restrictions are eased to allow this”.

Note the role of Government in law and guidance; note that church hierarchies have to make decisions within the law and can then offer guidance to dioceses. Note that incumbents and local faith leaders then will have discretion and responsibilities as they take decisions within the law and having regard to guidance.

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The Cabinet and you know the strength of backbench feeling. In the Commons this week the Second Church Estates Commissioner Andrew Selous MP said the law banned public services, adding that Government might reopen places of worship after six more weeks, possibly from 4th July. Even that may be extended by delay in publishing regulations, decision by diocesan bishops and local circumstances. Weddings (whether in the church porch or inside), christenings and other services are wanted, safely and soon. Ten can gather in a crematorium yet one cannot be in a church.

As Prime Minister you will know the views of a representative Catholic pastor: "I ask you to put pressure on the Government for private prayer as soon as possible. Two-metre social distancing is easy (easier than in a supermarket) and sensible hygiene precautions can quickly be put in place. It seems odd that you can go for a walk, enter a busy supermarket, get on a bus but cannot go to a large virtually-empty-for-much-of-the-time building."

We ask that our leaders, Government and church, especially the Church of England, together find reasonably safe ways to reopen our churches for prayer, for funerals even with limited congregations and for worship sooner than July.

In faith,

Yours sincerely,

Sir Peter Bottomley MP

Member of Parliament for Worthing West

For and on behalf of:

Sir David Amess MP
Lee Anderson MP
Bob Blackman MP
Sir Graham Brady MP
Sir Roger Gale MP
Jonathan Gullis MP
Adrian Holle MP

Chris Loder MP
Jonathan Lord MP
Tim Loughton MP
Jerome Mayhew MP
Damien Moore MP
Sir Bob Neill MP
Andrew Rosindell MP

Alexander Stafford MP
James Sunderland MP
Sir Desmond Swayne MP
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