

Message from Revd Kerry Tankard, Yorkshire West District Chair.

This message was recorded and posted on Facebook on 24th June 2020, the day the government announced that it may soon be possible for communities to meet again, physically, for worship. The Methodist Church is considering this announcement and further guidance will follow. Kerry offers you these reflections. (Please be aware this was not scripted, but is just a message from the heart). It has since been transcribed so it can be shared with everyone.

Today is the 24th June and it marks me 19 years since I was stood on the platform at Ipswich and was received in to full connexion and then later that day went to Ely Cathedral and knelt and was ordained. I say that only because today is a special day for me, a day that is filled with memories and with important moments. I realise that yesterday was a special day for other people, there was an announcement from the government that there would be the possibility of churches considering how they reopen from 4th July.

I realise as I talk to different people that this is met with mixed emotions. For some there is a sense of excitement, a sense of a return to the places that matter; the chance to gather with those people who are part of our communities. For others it creates a sense of anxiety; how will we do everything we need to do to make the spaces we have safe for others? And yet even more than that there are other questions. Is this the right time to return? Have we considered all the things that we need to consider? Not just practically, not just about running the taps and checking for Legionnaires or making sure our surfaces are clean. But have we considered properly what it means to be the church? What have we learnt through this process this last three months that have helped us reflect on what it means to be the people of God? When we have not been able to gather physically together but have somehow sought to be faithful together in different ways.

There will be very different expectations from different people. I completely understand the need of some to return. To enter the building, to sit in a familiar place, to pray in the company of others at a safe distance, and to feel again physically part of a different group of people.

But I also understand the concerns that, have we learnt nothing about what we had become before lockdown, that was limiting us and somehow diminishing us as the church serving God in the world today?

Yesterday I had the privilege of sitting with Superintendents on a Zoom. We were accompanied by Graham Jones, a member of the learning network, who placed before us a sense of understanding and a sense of searching. He said that the time we're living through has been reflected in different ways by other people and in such crisis and such catastrophes there is almost like a three phase period.

The first phase is one of **response**; it's one when we suddenly become active to the crisis and find what it is we need to do, in order for things to work and for people to be cared for and served. That period is a period as long as it needs to be. But from that responsive period there then comes a period of **recovery**. A period of trying to work out what it is we should be doing, thinking about what has happened and how we might plan for the future. That period of recovery can take an awfully long time; you don't suddenly rebuild an infrastructure overnight. You can't suddenly just press a button and rest and go back to where you were and carry on. The world is very different at this moment and we have to reorientate ourselves; we have to think about what it is we need to do, what it is we need to address, and then comes the period of **reconstruction**.

The period of rebuilding, of renewing, of reordering, of making things work in new and wonderful ways. For some of our folk, they are still in that place of response, it's just a different response. Initially it was, "We've been locked down what do we do?" And now the government have said well you may be able to meet again, they are now in that place of "I need to see people, what are you going to do?" And that sometimes in tension with that other phase, that recovery phase, where others are needing to work out and think through all the issues, not just the practical, but also the meaningful and the theological.

Reconstruction probably stands away from all of us at the moment. What I ask of all of us is this. How can we understand each other as some of us would be at different points on this journey. It may be that some of our churches can not and should not reopen soon, and that may still feel hard, but it may be the right thing in order to let the right questions be asked and the right decisions be made by people who understand what it is that we wish to do next. It may be that some of our churches can reopen, that they can meet a very particular need in this time, but still, there are important questions even before doing that. Questions about why are we reopening, for whom are we reopening and in reopening what are we seeking to do.

I know there will be for some, excitement and for others anxiety from the announcement of the government. What I ask is for patience, for understanding and reflection, to realise that while it might seem the simplest thing just to start again, it may not be the best thing.

I do hope and pray that each of us will have the chance and opportunity to continue to think through the things that are affecting us and changing us at this time. I know that so many people have been in isolation now for three months, and the need to break the isolation is critically important and we need to listen and hear that. At the same time, we need to be careful about what the church is, and what the church is called to be and we need to be mindful about how we plan for reopening and re-beginning

There was a response, there was a recovery, and now we are looking at how we reconstruct the future together.

I ask God's blessing on you, as always, and I continue to pray for you and I ask that you continue to pray for me.
God bless you.