

Rt Hon Boris Johnson, PC, MP
The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 0AA

Copy:

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick, MP, Secretary of State for Communities and
Local Government
Lord Stephen Greenhalgh, Minister of State

Dear Prime Minister

We write as leaders of faith communities represented on the government Places of Worship Taskforce to raise our profound concerns at the forthcoming restriction measures to be introduced in England on Thursday 5th November 2020.

Since the Covid-19 virus first emerged, faith communities across the country have been acutely aware of the tragic consequences for people everywhere and of the intractable dilemmas which the government has had to negotiate. Our thoughts and prayers have been with the Cabinet, Parliament and all who advise them, and above all with those who have died or are bereaved, unemployed or unbearably stressed by the virus and its consequences.

Public Worship is covid-19 secure

In the last six months we have collaborated closely with Ministers and officials to keep people safe. We worked together to establish two principles of co-operation:

1. Ensuring a balance between the government providing health and safety requirements, and faith communities subsequently determining theological aspects of what forms of worship/activity could be accommodated within this. Many of us have gone above and beyond the former and safely implemented the latter. In this way, the fine and desired balance has been maintained.

2. The importance of proceeding on the basis of good quality scientific and medical evidence, but also that the language of the guidance was both specific enough to ensure safety, but non-specific enough to allow accommodation of different faiths without implicit bias towards one group or another.

We have demonstrated, by our action, that places of worship and public worship can be made safe from Covid transmission. Given the significant work we have already done, we consider there to be, now, no scientific justification for the wholesale suspension of public worship.

We understand entirely that the country faces significant challenges and the reasons behind the Government's decision to bring in new measures. But we strongly disagree with the decision to suspend public worship during this time. We have had reaffirmed, through the bitter experience of the last six months, the critical role that faith plays in moments of tremendous crisis, and we believe public worship is essential. We set out below why we believe it is essential, and we ask you to allow public worship, when fully compliant with the existing covid-19 secure guidance, to continue.

Public Worship is Essential to sustain our service

Faith communities have been central to the pandemic response, and we will continue to be so.

During the first period of restrictions, we ceased public worship in our buildings. We moved much online, and we have provided significant resource to support our communities and our nation, from practical support such as foodbanks and volunteering, to promoting social cohesion, mental health and coping during these months.

But common worship is constitutive of our identity, and essential for our self-understanding. Without the worshipping community, our social action and support cannot be energised and sustained indefinitely. Our commitment to care for others comes directly from our faith, which must be sustained and strengthened by our meeting together in common worship. Worshipping together is core to our

identity and an essential aspect of sustaining our mission and our activity.

Common worship is also necessary to sustain the health and wellbeing of faith community members engaged in caring for others whether paid or voluntary¹. Much has been made of the adverse impact on mental health of volunteer and paid carers during this pandemic. Common Worship is an important way of sustaining the wellbeing, and ability to serve, of people of faith who volunteer. The benefits of public worship are scientifically well attested². For this reason alone, given the size and duration of the contribution of faith communities to the pandemic response, and the importance of sustaining their commitment and wellbeing, public worship is essential, should be classed by government as necessary and supported to continue. It enables and sustains people of faith in contributing to the service and health of our nation.

Public Worship is necessary for social cohesion and connectedness

Increasing social scientific evidence makes clear that social connectedness, solidarity and social cohesion are key to both enabling people to stay resilient throughout restrictions due to covid-19 and central to compliance with the behaviours we need them to adopt to reduce transmission. This has been attested to in papers from Government's own Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies. We also know that faith communities are creators of such connectedness and cohesion and their public presence and witness helps engender this. Given the importance of solidarity and connectedness, and the importance of public presence, we believe public worship should be classed as essential, and supported to continue.

Public Worship is important for the Mental Health of our nation

¹ Koenig HG. Research on religion, spirituality, and mental health: A review. *Can J Psychiatry*. 2009;54:283–91

² Bruce MA, Martins D, Duru K, Beech BM, Sims M, Harawa N, et al. (2017) Church attendance, allostatic load and mortality in middle aged adults. *PLoS ONE* 12(5): e0177618. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0177618>

The health benefits of attending worship are well known, and the burden of psychological and physical ill-health from isolation and during the pandemic are increasingly well understood. This is especially so for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic people. Public Health England's own review found that faith communities were an important connect for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic people during this period.

Moreover, it is a well-known and well-studied phenomenon that people turn to faith communities as a way of coping with trauma and grief³. This is the common experience of faith communities in England during COVID and especially since communal worship restarted. People are turning to faith communities, not just in our social care services but during public worship, as a way of coping with their sense of trauma, grief and loss. The public mental health impact of this has been significant, and it provides an important way of supporting the nation without overburdening NHS and other mental health services. Public Worship provides an important sign that faith communities are there for people. We believe this must be regarded by government as essential.

Public Worship is an essential sign of hope

The psychological impact of uncertainty, restriction and the impact of the infection is increasingly well studied. We know that people seek signs of normality to help them make sense of restrictions and major change and disruption to their lives. We also know that where people see others act with hope and purpose that we will recover from disasters and traumas; this gives them hope and encouragement too. From a social psychological perspective, faith communities who consistently embody behaviours and attitudes that are covid-19 safe and hopeful provide encouragement to others through modelling these behaviours and attitudes. They are part of the journey to recovery. Public worship is therefore an essential sign that we can find new ways of living with Covid-19 until the vaccine is found, and part of the psychological and social cohesion needed to exit restriction measures. Public worship should therefore be supported to continue.

³ Park, C. L., Holt, C. L., Le, D., Christie, J., & Williams, B. R., Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 2017. Positive and negative religious coping styles as prospective predictors of well-being in African Americans

In summary, the scientific evidence shows that social solidarity and connectedness are key to people maintaining motivation to comply with COVID secure measures and to maintain good mental health. And there is good scientific evidence of the importance of faith and faith communities for positive mental health and coping, especially for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic people.

We have already said there is no scientific rationale for suspension of Public Worship where it is compliant with the guidance that we have worked jointly with government to establish. We believe government, and Public Health England, accept this.

Government is making decisions about what aspects of our life during this period of restrictions are essential. We believe we have demonstrated that continuation of public worship is essential, for all the reasons we have set out above.

We call on government to recognise and support this, and enable us to continue to worship safely, as part of the essential fabric of the nation.

Yours sincerely

+ Justin Cantaur
The Most Revd & Rt Hon Justin Welby Archbishop of Canterbury

+Vincent Cardinal Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster

+Stephen Ebor
The Most Revd & Rt Hon Stephen Cottrell Archbishop of York

+Sarah Londin
The Rt Revd & Rt Hon Sarah Mullally Bishop of London
with the support of the members of the House of Bishops of the
Church of England

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis
Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the
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