

Hello everyone,

We hope this email finds you all well. During this strange and difficult time, the Elders have been meeting very regularly to monitor the situation and to work out how the church can continue its activities. We have made great efforts to stop as few of our activities as possible, and to keep as much contact as we can with each other during lockdown. Recently, the government has outlined its plans for the country to start to return to a less restricted life. We felt that the eldership should do the same, to give you all an idea of what Swallownest Baptist Church's next steps are and how we see the coming weeks and months.

Firstly, we need to start with the bad news. It is clear that COVID19 will not just go away, and our everyday activities will be significantly affected by the coronavirus for a good time to come. The Elders have spent a lot of time thinking and praying about this, and we want to outline our position so that everyone is clear about what lies ahead for the church. The plan that we share in this email will give us all a degree of certainty. We will, of course, closely monitor the situation and, if any significant changes happen during this time, we will be well-placed to adjust our plans accordingly.

For the foreseeable future (at least until September and possibly longer term), no regular church events will happen in a physical, face-to-face form. We understand that this is sad and disappointing news, but even if the government reopens places of worship, we will not look to restart full meetings. We would simply not be in the position to do so safely, for a number of reasons:

- We feel we have a duty of care to each other, and so we do not want to encourage anyone to place themselves in risky situations.
- Before we go back into the building, we will need to do full risk assessments, as well as other health and safety documentation.
- The building will need to be thoroughly cleaned before we use it.
- The building will need thorough cleaning after each use.
- We will need to comply with government guidelines regarding social distancing, and this means that an incredibly limited number of face-to-face worshipers would actually be able to participate.

So, to be very clear, until at least September:

- No congregation will gather in the building.
- No other church activities will take place in the building.
- The over 70s age group continues to be a high risk group and therefore they are discouraged from coming into the building for any reason.
- Children shouldn't come into the building for any reason.

That's the bad news. However, this isn't everything we want to share with you! There is equally a lot of good news too. Our online church videos have been a huge success and we have seen vast numbers engaging with the church, with hundreds of people viewing each Sunday service. We continue to hear stories of people who, for years, have been on the fringes of church but not attending services, who are now watching each week from home. In fact this reflects the national picture: before lockdown, an estimated 7% of adults engaged with church, however around 25% of UK adults are now engaging with a church online! This is quite incredible and it confirms the truth of scripture. In Matthew 16:18, we read that Jesus said to Peter, *"I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* Let's all take comfort in the fact that, if the very gates of hell cannot stand against God's church, something like lockdown certainly doesn't stand a chance!

Because of what we've outlined, we plan to continue with these online services from now on and we will continue to engage with people online, to see God's kingdom grow in these new and amazing ways.

We also have plans specifically for how we see Swallownest Baptist Church growing and developing over the next few months. These can be split into four areas.

1. **Our services.** Whenever any future easing of lockdown makes it possible, we plan to film our services back in our building. As we have already said, we will not be inviting congregations to join us, but we plan to film sung worship, sermons and notices all from inside our building. We believe this will help bring a sense of familiarity to our meetings, as well as making it a lot easier for us to do our recordings each week.
2. **Pastoral care.** For some weeks now, we have been encouraging house groups to make sure they keep in close contact with each other, both for Bible study but also for pastoral care. We hope that house groups will make sure they are in communication at least once a week and preferably that this is face-to-face via something like Zoom. It's never been easier for us to make use of technology and it doesn't even require you to have a computer or internet connection. Even if house groups are not comfortable doing a Bible study in this way, we would really encourage this connection to make sure we can maintain our pastoral care with each other at this time.
3. **Junior church.** It has been wonderful to see the launch of our new Facebook group for our Junior Church. We are really pleased that our Junior Church leaders have been able to put together videos for our children and the resources that have been made available have been brilliant. We are excited to see this grow and continue in the coming months.
4. **Outreach.** Outreach is quite a challenge without being able to meet physically! We've had to get our heads around what this might look like. However, we hope to capitalise on the large numbers we see interacting with us online. We would love to see more connection with people on the fringes of the church and so we are planning on putting on some online events that you can invite your friends and family to join in with:
 - a. We are currently working with Philippa Hanna with the view of her putting on a concert especially for us, via our YouTube channel. We hope to have more details for you soon.
 - b. Then, hopefully sometime in July, we plan to start an online Alpha course. This, again, will give us all an opportunity to invite friends and family to join and ask some questions about Christianity. We hope these two things will help us reach out and deepen our connections with those on the fringes of our church.
 - c. Another thing that we would love to see is more use of our social media platforms. We plan to use social media as a way of connecting both with those in our local community and also with those further afield. We understand this is not something that everyone is involved with and will be able to make use of, but for anyone who does use social media we would love you to connect more with us and our community in this way.
 - d. As part of outreach, we want to encourage you to share your testimonies. This will be a short, two minute video of how you came to faith and how Jesus has transformed you. We know that not everyone will want to do this, but hearing from a variety of different people will have a greater impact on those on the fringe and the marginalised. We are called to reach out and share the

Gospel News of Jesus Christ. What better way to do this than in the form of sharing our testimony?

In conclusion, although things are very tough at the moment, we believe the church now has an opportunity to shine out in ways that may never have been possible before. We know this may not bring you the news you were hoping for, but we pray you will find comfort and strength in the fact that the church continues to grow and move forward. We praise God for all He has done over these last few months and we trust He will continue to work in the months to come. As we know, Jesus is the light of this world and when the world seems dark, He becomes that much more visible.

John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

So, take care of yourselves and each other, and God bless.

The Eldership team.