

27 March 2020

**A message to all who are the  
United Reformed Church**

**from Derek Estill and Nigel Uden  
Moderators of the General Assembly**

Amid this Covid-19 shaped world, we greet you in the name of God –  
by whose grace we were created,  
by whose mercy and love we are sustained,  
by whose love we will be held forever.

Even as we are moderators of the General Assembly, so we are immersed in local churches, and it is as your companions on the Way that we wished to write to you this weekend. Our experiences mirror yours – we, too, are distancing ourselves physically from others, we too are feeling uncertain, sometimes even fearful.

Coronavirus Covid-19 has been creeping up on us. We watched its effect upon other countries and washed our hands as we sang 'Happy birthday'. Now it is affecting us, and last Sunday Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's First Minister, punctured any complacency there may have been, saying, "life should not feel normal", and if it does, you should ask "if you are doing the right things". It's a new world, and we don't always feel so brave.

How should we react? There have been essential things to do. Far from having less on our agenda, many of us have been burning the candle at both ends. And there was no alternative; stuff was happening, and we needed to deal with it. But it seems Covid-19 will shape our lives for some time to come. In the coming weeks it will be good if we can regain a balance between activity and reflection, for few of us can thrive on the freneticism and angst that has suddenly overtaken us. It has been said that a person best deals with a new situation not by hitting the ground running, but by hitting the ground kneeling. The place of prayer in this coronavirus situation, we would suggest, is vital. Prayer can maintain our own equilibrium, as it opens us to the peace and grace of God. We will also surely want to intercede in prayer, holding before God people who are unwell or bereaved, people who are giving their all to bring us through the pandemic, and people whose all has been taken from them through the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, of a business or of mental health. And then there is the need for prayer with those in countries that have neither the finances nor the health service of ours. The call to pray last Sunday evening at 7.00pm, placing a candle in a street-facing window, was moving. May we commend that to you as a weekly observance? Even when we are feeling frustrated that we cannot do much to help, we can all pray, and there is something strengthening when we do so together, simultaneously.



Part of what is carrying us through is the devoted and tireless leadership of many people. We are more grateful than we can say for our General Secretariat and all their colleagues at Church House, for the Officers of the Assembly, for our committees, for our Synod Moderators and all who work with them in those thirteen councils of the church. And we are mindful of all those who are leading the responses of local churches. We hear of ministers and elders, members and friends who have strained every sinew to arrange pastoral care, to make it possible for us to worship in our homes, and to be part of our neighbourhoods' reaching out to people in need. Other than mixing 'from' and 'form', one of Nigel's most frequent typos is to press the *w* and the *e* at the same time when starting the word elders. Yet how right that is; welding joins two pieces of metal so that they become one, and so that they withstand the forces to which they may be subjected. Many people are welders in every sphere of the church, as well as in every layer of government, and in society at large. For each sense in which are being held together, we give thanks for welders.

Who knows where this will lead us? Quite probably, not to exactly where it found us. Society will be different; we will each be different; and the church will be different. In 1949, R. W. Hugh-Jones was called to be the minister of Warwick Road Congregational Church in Coventry. The city remained devastated after the blitz of November 1940. It needed rebuilding, renewing. Something different was being asked of the church, too. Years later, Hugh-Jones recalled that he had been persuaded to accept the call when a deacon said to him, 'there is nothing in this church that cannot be changed as long as the Gospel is preached, and the Kingdom of God extended.' Even if we might use slightly different words, pondering what rebuilding and renewing the future will require, maybe what that deacon said could speak to us, even for us all.

And what of God? Sam Wells, Vicar of London's St Martin-in-the-Fields, speaks of God being 'for', and being 'with'. Wells under values neither, but observes that in the Jesus narratives, God's work *for* is focussed on a brief moment in Jerusalem, 1% of his life, whereas Jesus is faithfully *with* us far more, 90% in Nazareth, 9% in Galilee. Is that not a central conviction of the Bible? Hebrew and Christian writings alike have God with us, a light to accompany us through the shadows. Given we appear to be in this crisis for the long haul, if we're walking the way and living the life of Jesus today there will be things we can do *for* each other and be they great or small they will matter significantly. But we must never underestimate the value of being *with* each other. Consistently and reliably, thoughtfully and sensitively with each other, and with God because God is always with us.

In our prayers, unto God's gracious mercy and protection we commit you.

Yours sincerely, in Christ,

Nigel Uden and Derek Estill