



– *being the church
in unusual times*

Lenten Devotional 2021

Just as we set aside time in the season of Advent to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ, we dedicate time in the season of Lent to contemplate our need of and give thanks for Christ’s life and death in preparation for the celebration of His resurrection. Observed in the six weeks leading up to Easter (40 days + Sundays), Lent is modelled on Jesus’ time of preparation and testing in the wilderness. This year, we indeed find ourselves in a time of testing and isolation, wrestling with what it means to be Christ’s body, the Church, in these unusual times. So this Lenten season, we hope to think through six aspects of that question using the PCI study series, *For Now: Being the Church in Unusual Times*. Each week, we will contemplate a different topic in the light of Scripture, allowing them to shape our time of corporate prayer on Sunday evenings (see schedule below).

Week*	Prayer	Topic	Passage
17-23 Feb	21 Feb	Engaging with God in Worship	Psalm 84
24 Feb - 2 March	28 Feb	Caring For One Another	Galatians 6:1-10
3-9 March	7 March	Encouraging Families with Younger Children	Deuteronomy 6:4-9
10-16 March	14 March	Following Jesus Together	James 1:2-8
17-23 March	21 March	Encouraging Young People	Luke 15:1-7
24-31 March	28 March	Sharing Our Faith	Acts 19:8-10

*each week starts on a Wednesday

The material can be studied at your own pace, in one sitting or broken up across the week.



For *now* – engaging with God in worship

Just *now*: Worshipping weakly?

The impact of necessary restrictions on gathering to curb the spread of Covid-19 have left us with a sense that instead of weekly worship, we find ourselves worshipping weakly. The worshipping life of the church has been interrupted by lockdowns and circuit breakers, and its normal rhythms have been disrupted by the need for shorter services and online offerings. Nevertheless, worshipping God is both a desire and duty central to who we are as the people of God.

Wednesday, 17 February

Read Psalm 84.

Watch a short introduction to this session by clicking [here](#) or read its transcript below.

For now, just about everything about church life is difficult, due to the restrictions arising from Covid-19. We face the challenge of having to think differently and wondering what we can do. One of the questions we find ourselves asking is, “How can we make the most of our times of worship in this season of our church life?” I wonder what you find challenging about that?

Psalm 84 opens a window on the place of worship in our lives. At this time, when restrictions on gathering together and what we can do in worship are so limiting, and we’re never quite sure what’s coming around the corner next, this passage expresses both our frustrations and desires about worship, which lie right at the centre of our church life. Now is an important moment to think about things, like:

- how our increased appreciation and awareness of the importance of worship has been one *good* thing arising from the period of the pandemic
- how we can try to make both in person and digital worship as accessible as possible to our whole congregation
- how worship plays a key part in keeping us focused on God in difficult times, and
- how to extend the impact of worship by talking with others afterwards about what we’ve experienced of God and in what way our response to that will find expression in our lives.

For now, it’s so important to think of simple ways in which we can engage effectively in worship in this next season of our church life.

David Thompson, Secretary of the Council for Congregational Life and Witness

Pray

Thursday, 18 February

Read Psalm 84.

Think about *gathering before God.*

Writing in the 16th century, John Calvin, one of the father figures of Presbyterianism, described the background to this psalm as follows:

The psalmist complains that nothing proved to him a source of greater distress than his being prevented from coming to the tabernacle, and his being banished from the assembly of the saints, where God was called upon. And yet he shows that nothing can withstand the longing desires of the godly; and that, surmounting all obstacles, they will be constantly engaged in seeking God and, so to speak, will make a way for themselves where there is none.

We can relate to this feeling of frustration and desire.

1. The psalmist expresses his strong desire to be with others worshipping God in verses 1 and 2. As gatherings for worship have been disrupted by lockdown and the restrictions necessary to maintain social distancing, how has this increased your appreciation and awareness of the part that weekly worship plays in your walk with God?

2. Pictures of 'dwelling', 'house' and 'home' abound in the early verses of the psalm. In what practical ways can we try to make digital and social distanced worship engaging and accessible to all of our church family? In particular, how can we make them a comfortable environment in which families with young children can feel included, like the sparrow with her young (v.3)?

Pray

Friday, 19 February

Read Psalm 84.

Think about *gathering before God.*

3. Verse 6 pictures journeying through particularly difficult seasons of life, like being in a dark and fearful valley. Nevertheless, strength can be found in refocusing our gaze on God (vv.5&7). What moments in worship, however disrupted, have reminded you of God's presence with you during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic?

4. It can be tempting to simply skip participating in weekly worship, whether in-person or digital, at present because doing so is either difficult to negotiate or less than all it usually is in impact. How do verses 10-12 challenge and encourage you to struggle to overcome that temptation?

Pray

Saturday, 20 February

Read Psalm 84.

Consider *things we can all do to continue to engage in worship as a congregation.*

These are simple things we can all do to continue to engage well in worship each week, whether digitally or in-person while having to navigate ongoing restrictions.

- **Follow** – even if you cannot gather to worship in-person or access digital worship, find out what happened on Sunday as your congregation gathered. What Bible passage was read? What was the theme of the sermon? What songs were sung? What topics were the subject of prayer? Read, reflect, and respond to what God was saying to your church family as it met, and you will feel less disconnected from its worshipping life.
- **Attend** – if circumstances allow you to attend in-person worship, make the effort to do so while carefully observing guidance to maintain your safety and the health of others. Find a balanced approach to danger, desire, and duty.
- **Include** – go out of your way to be understanding of the challenges others face in engaging in worship which is not as it usually is, especially families with young children.
- **Connect** – where digital worship is available and your only option to gather with your church family, commit to doing so at the normal service time to maintain the routine of weekly engaging with God on His day.
- **Participate** – worshipping while socially distanced without singing or staying engaged while online do not come naturally and call for patience and perseverance, but not complaint. Instead, commit to being a focused and enthusiastic participant in praise, prayer, listening and responding to preaching.
- **Pray** – these are challenging times for those who lead worship and make it available online. Pray for your minister, for those who lead praise and those who stream or upload services.

Pray

Sunday, 21 February

Pray with us from 7-8 pm, joining us on Zoom if you are able.

Monday, 22 February

Read Psalm 84.

Try *suggestions for extending a conversation about worship.*

- **Construct** – build a network of one or two people who you can speak with after worship to talk about what God was saying to you as an individual and a church family. Use telephone, text or other digital mediums to do so. Remember to include those whose circumstances mean they can't attend church or access the service, so that they can also feel engaged.
- **Prepare** – worship will be more meaningful and have a greater impact on our hearts and lives if we prepare carefully to listen to God and are open to what He is saying. So, don't rush into the building or online at the last moment. Instead, ensure some time to get organised and be still before God.
- **Reflect** – as you participate in worship, reflect by asking yourself "what is God saying to me in my current circumstances?" and "what is God saying to us as a congregation in our current circumstances?"

- **Challenge** – listen for a particular area in which God is challenging you about something specific. Make this a topic of conversation in your follow up conversation with others.
- **Encouragement** – listen for something particular in which God is encouraging you as you live through these difficult days. Make this a topic of conversation in your follow up conversation with others.
- **Pray** – pray with others about your conversation together around worship and the particular needs of your church family at this time.

Pray through these suggestions and commit to trying one in the coming week.

Tuesday, 23 February

Read Psalm 84.

Follow up?

The Psalms are a particularly rich resource to stimulate praise and prayer to God, giving us words and pictures which we often struggle to find and form for ourselves in worship. Visit psalterproject.com/sing to find faithful translations in contemporary musical form of psalms ranging over many topics and themes. Use these if you cannot attend worship or share them in your follow-on conversations with others.

Pray about what God is leading your congregation to do for now to effectively engage with God in worship.



For now – caring for one another

Just now: All needy. All needed.

We are used to pastoral care in a congregation being offered to those who have experienced a particular life crisis – bereavement, illness, loss, grief. Often pastoral care is given by the minister, elder, another staff member or specially trained group in the congregation. Suddenly, all of us find ourselves in need of care because the Covid-19 pandemic affects us all in different ways. It's now too big a task to be left to a few. All of us are both needy and needed to care for one another.

Wednesday, 24 February

Read Galatians 6:1-10.

Watch a short introduction to this session by clicking [here](#) or read its transcript below.

For now, just about everything about church life is difficult, due to the restrictions arising from Covid-19. We face the challenge of having to think differently and wondering what we can do. One of the questions we find ourselves asking is, "In what ways can we care for one another in this season of church life?" I wonder what you find challenging about that?

Galatians 6 talks about carrying one another's burdens. At this time, when suddenly we find ourselves all experiencing life as a bit of a struggle and we can't leave caring for others to the minister, elders, or others who usually look out for those in need, this passage has a lot to teach us about how to care for one another with watchfulness, gentleness and patience. Now is an important moment to think about things, like:

- what we can learn as a church family about looking out for each other from how we've had to find new ways of being in touch with our extended families,
- what particular burdens different groups in your congregation might be carrying and how we can best get alongside to lighten their load,
- how we can keep on gently encouraging others, and
- how to have a good conversation with someone else about the challenges they're experiencing during this period of ongoing pandemic.

For now, it's so important to think about simple ways we can care for one another in this next season of church life.

David Thompson, Secretary of the Council for Congregational Life and Witness

Pray

Thursday, 25 February

Read Galatians 6:1-10.

Think about *carrying one another's burdens.*

These verses have a lot to teach us about what it looks and feels like to look out for one another in our church life with watchfulness, gentleness and patience.

1. These verses picture the church as family (vv. 1 and 10). During Covid-19, we have had to find different ways of keeping in touch with and caring for our physical family members. In what ways might they help shape how we look after one another in church life in present circumstances?

2. Verse 2 calls us to 'carry each other's burdens'. What burdens are different groups in your congregation shouldering just now because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic – children, young people, families, singles, elderly, the isolated, those working overseas, others? In what simple ways might we lighten their load?

Pray

Friday, 26 February

Read Galatians 6:1-10.

Think about *carrying one another's burdens.*

3. It is easy for us to become judgmental about the way others are responding to the very real challenges of everyday life and involvement in church activity. This passage warns us to beware of that attitude (vv. 1, 3-4) as we seek to help and restore others. How can we find out the circumstances and challenges others are facing and so be better equipped to gently encourage them in these days?

4. Caring for others usually involves long, hard work. It is easy to start, but harder to maintain. How can we ensure we don't become 'weary in doing good' (v.9) as we care for one another?

Pray

Saturday, 27 February

Read Galatians 6:1-10.

Consider *ways of keeping in touch to care for one another.*

Perhaps we can frame our care for one another around a few simple ways of keeping in touch. Used as appropriate, these might help our congregation care for a variety of members in as comprehensive a way as possible while navigating ongoing restrictions.

- **Card or Text** – personal, short and simple, but prayerfully sent, may be the right thing at just the right time.
- **Telephone call** – personal, longer encounter, offering the opportunity to speak, listen and pray. Helpful in allowing someone to hear a familiar voice.
- **Video call** – personal and fuller connection, offering the opportunity to speak, listen and pray. Helpful in allowing someone to see a familiar face.
- **House call** – personal and in-person, offering the opportunity to speak, listen and pray. Offers the often-underrated gift of just being present with someone else. Always to be undertaken with appropriate care and only as current restrictions allow.
- **Small group follow up (digital or in-person)** – Personal but wider contact, offering the opportunity to extend conversation, support, learning and praying together.
- **Group letter, email or WhatsApp** – communal and helpful in reminding everyone in a group or church organisation that we are encountering the challenges of this pandemic together.

Pray

Sunday, 28 February

Pray with us from 7-8 pm, on Zoom if you are able.

Monday, 01 March

Read Galatians 6:1-10.

Try *suggestions for having a caring conversation*

- **Starting the conversation** – Begin by asking, ‘What is life like for you at the moment?’ Listen not just for the response, but for the tone and tenor of how it is being said. Sometimes, that reveals so much more.
- **Leaving space to listen** – You may be the only person this person will speak to that day, maybe even that week. Resist the temptation to do all the talking or take control of the conversation.
- **Identifying need by asking sensitive questions** – ‘In what ways are you finding it difficult to do what needs to be done during this period of restrictions?’ is a softer, more open way into identifying needs than, ‘How can I help you?’
- **Changing the conversation** – There is a lot of doom and gloom circling at the minute. Many people are anxious and others suffer from mental health issues that make life doubly tough at a time like this. If the conversation is becoming negative in tone, take the opportunity to sensitively move it onto more positive, hopeful ground.
- **Sharing Scripture and prayer** – Think about a few simple verses from the Bible you can offer to read. Nothing too long. Something on which you can make a short comment. Ask how you can pray specifically for them. Then pray. Keep it short, simple and tailored to what you know of

where this person is on their journey of faith – still searching, new believer, long-time follower of Jesus.

Pray through these suggestions and commit to trying one in the coming week.

Tuesday, 02 March

Read Galatians 6:1-10.

Follow up?

For frameworks in using the Bible in pastoral care, see this resource available for free download on the PCI website www.presbyterianireland.org/pastoralvisitingcards.

Pray about what God is leading your congregation to do for now in caring for one another.



For now – encouraging families with younger children

Just now: It takes a village.

Being a parent can be hard work sometimes. Add to that a global pandemic and there are so many more challenges that get thrown into the mix of family life. One is that many of the usual church programmes that supplement the role of parents as primary disciplers of their children have fallen foul of restrictions on church life. That shouldn't mean that the crucial role of the church in supporting and encouraging families with younger children can be set aside. Rather, it just needs to look different for now. Just as the African proverb says, 'it takes a village to raise a child', it also takes a family of faith supporting parents to raise children to follow Jesus - and never more so than at this time.

Wednesday, 03 March

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

Watch a short introduction to this session by clicking [here](#) or read its transcript below.

For now, just about everything about church life is difficult, due to the restrictions arising from Covid-19. We face the challenge of having to think differently and wondering what we can do. One of the questions we have found ourselves asking is about how we can encourage families with younger children around our church. I wonder what you've found challenging around that?

Deuteronomy 6 is a key passage in the Bible about passing on the faith to the next generation. At this time, it is difficult to retain connection with families – children and parents – because most of our usual programs have stopped. It reminds us of the importance of supporting and encouraging parents to share their faith in the everyday round of family life. As simple as that sounds, it's not easy or without its ups and downs. Now is an important moment to think about things, like:

- how can we facilitate families with young children in our services of worship?
- how can we encouraging parents in their own walk with God, when that can be so easily squeezed out by additional burdens caused by disruption of normal family life patterns?
- what simple things could our congregation do to equip parents to talk about God and His place in their children's lives, especially at this time?
- how could you have a conversation with a family and in the family that might be just the lift they need as they try to follow Jesus together in these days?

For now, it's so important to focus on simple things and find one thing we can use to engage and encourage families with younger children in this next season of church life.

Ruth Bromley, Children's Development Officer

Pray

Thursday, 04 March

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

Think about *being the village*.

These verses are a go-to passage in thinking about what discipleship in the family looks and feels like. They give an outline that helps us to consider both God's method and key moments in sharing faith with our kids. It is less programme and more personal. Less rules and roadmap, more regular relationship.

1. These verses are addressed to Israel as a community of all ages seeking to follow God together (v.4). Children are a part of that, to be both included and considered in the life of God's people as a whole (v.7). As our congregation struggles to come to terms with restrictions on gathering (arising from the Covid-19 pandemic), how does our response display an attempt to facilitate families with young children in how we worship and seek to support one another?

2. A primary aspect of effectively passing on faith in these verses is the importance of strong parental faith and devotion, built on basic practices which enable a growing love for the Lord with heart, soul and strength, and a desire to live in His ways (vv.5-6). In this time when everyday life is more stressful and family life more demanding, what practical ways could our church encourage parents to ensure they take time to develop their own walk with God?

Pray

Friday, 05 March

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

Think about *being the village*.

3. The passage goes on to give a simple framework for sharing faith in the everyday rhythms and routines of home and family life – talking about faith when sitting or walking together, at bedtime and first thing in the morning (v.7). This has become even more important with the onset of Covid-19 as so much congregational children's ministry has stopped. What might this everyday faith-sharing look like for the ordinary family? In what ways can our church encourage parents in this task of sharing faith in everyday conversation?

4. Verses 8 and 9 go on to suggest that it is not enough to just talk about faith with our children, but that there is a visual element to teaching and illustrating it. In Old Testament Israel, that involved tying symbols to hands and foreheads, writing on doorposts and gates. In what ways can our congregation equip parents with simple tools that encourage talking about faith in the family and showing it to be a real part of the present experience of children living through the upheavals of the pandemic period?

Pray

Saturday, 06 March

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

Consider *things we can do as a congregation to encourage families with younger children.*

- **Understand** – seek to understand the specific challenges experienced by families with young children arising from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Include** – as you make decisions and plan your congregation’s response to Covid-19 restrictions, make arrangements for worship in-person or digitally and prioritise other possible activities. Include children and the needs of their parents in your thinking.
- **Devotional** – encourage parents in their spiritual walk by signposting resources like the [Tides Daily Devotional](#) on the PCI website.
- **Equip** – create simple resource packs to be dropped off with families containing books and resources which encourage family discipleship.
- **Pray** – make sure families with young children and their particular needs are included in prayer in church services, prayer times and sharing of prayer requests.
- **Connect** – have the minister, an elder or children’s ministry leader organise a time to call a family on Zoom and take time to chat to everyone in the family together, then pray with them.

Pray

Sunday, 07 March

Pray with us from 7-8 pm, on Zoom if you are able.

Monday, 08 March

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

Try *creating conversations with and in families.*

- **Coffee** – set up a Zoom coffee time after church where members can catch up with families and children can connect and chat. Breakout rooms could also be used to connect families together or to have members pray for individual families.
- **Walk** – walking is an outdoor activity that, with appropriate social distancing, is both possible and popular. Encourage families to be aware of God’s world around them and to ponder questions about Him as they are out and about.
- **Questions** – encourage families to share the meal table together and to use that time to ask each other questions like, “What was good about your day?”, “What was challenging?”, and “Where did you see God in your day?”
- **Morning** – encourage time in the morning, while brushing teeth, tying shoelaces or getting in the car, to simply pray, handing the day and all it holds over to God.
- **Bedtime** – encourage taking time at the end of the day to read the Bible and thank God for our day as a simple and important routine.

Pray through these suggestions and commit to trying one in the coming week.

Tuesday, 09 March

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

Follow up?

To find out more about faith in the family and to signpost parents for more ideas, visit the [PCI Family Ministry Facebook page](#) and the [Kitchen Table Project website](#).

Pray about what God is leading your congregations to do for now to encourage families with younger children.



For now – following Jesus together

Just now: discipleship in difficult and dark days

Many of the methods we usually deploy to develop discipleship in our congregation's life have been impacted by restrictions on gathering together arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. An aspect of church life that particularly requires us to be together has suddenly become more difficult when circumstances have forced us to be apart. However, more than ever we need to find simple ways of helping one another to follow Jesus together against the background of unusually dark days.

Wednesday, 10 March

Read James 1:2-8.

Watch a short introduction to this session by clicking [here](#) or read its transcript below.

For now, just about everything about church life is difficult, due to the restrictions arising from Covid-19. We face the challenge of having to think differently and wondering what we can do. One of the questions we find ourselves asking is, "How can we continue finding ways of following Jesus together in this season of our church life. I wonder if you've found that challenging too.

James 1 has lots to say about following Jesus when times are tough. At this time, when it's difficult to develop discipleship, because something we're used to doing together suddenly finds us forced apart, this passage reminds us how following Jesus isn't always easy and involves encouraging each other to keep going through the hard times. Now, it's an important message to think about how other people can gently help us get a handle on what God might be doing when life feels uphill, or sharing what we've found encouraging in our walk with God during the period of the pandemic. It also involves finding fresh ways to pursue and persevere in the faith when so much of our regular church life has been disrupted, and also discovering what it means to persevere and how we can help each other to just keep going, even having a good conversation with someone else about following Jesus at this time.

For now, it's so important to focus on simple things and find one thing that we can all do to help each other to follow Jesus in this next season of our church life.

Rick Hill, Discipleship and Leadership Development Officer

Pray

Thursday, 11 March

Read James 1:2-8.

Think about *God at work in our circumstances.*

Following Jesus isn't all about enjoying special experiences on the mountaintop, but also learning to follow Him in the difficulties of the valley. Followers of Jesus need to understand they aren't immune from suffering and that discipleship often involves a cost. These verses teach us about our own trials and suggest ways in which we might encourage others in their faith as they experience difficult circumstances.

1. The idea that we could 'consider it pure joy... whenever we face trials of many kinds' (v.1) challenges our very feeling-centred response to life's ups and downs. James addresses his instruction to 'brothers and sisters' together. In what ways can other people gently help us gain a deeper perspective on what God is doing in our lives when circumstances are difficult?

2. These verses read like a roadmap for this season of life, charting the landscape of our struggle to find joy (v.2), persevere (v.4), depend on God for wisdom (v.5), and believe and not doubt (v.6). Which of these are you finding particularly difficult in present circumstances as you try to follow Jesus? In which area have you found encouragement?

Pray

Friday, 12 March

Read James 1:2-8.

Think about *God at work in our circumstances.*

3. Some of the things we might have come to rely on for spiritual growth have been stripped away during the Covid-19 pandemic. Restrictions mean that Sunday worship has been disrupted and other church programmes have been paused. In what ways has this caused you to have to find fresh ways to persevere and develop resilience in your discipleship? How have you experienced the help of others, or reached out to express your support to someone else, as you have tried to follow Jesus together? What little things have made a big difference?

4. Verse 4 presents discipleship as something that slowly and painstakingly matures before coming to completion. How are you finding yourself having to exercise patience and perseverance in following Jesus in this unusual season of life? In what simple ways can you help others who are struggling to just keep going?

Pray

Saturday, 13 March

Read James 1:2-8.

Consider *ways we can follow Jesus together.*

There are simple things we can all do both to develop our own discipleship and also encourage the faith of others. Used as appropriate, these might help your congregation develop discipleship together while navigating ongoing restrictions.

- **Bible** – Commit to reading a section of the Bible together. Why not start with the book of James and read a section each day. If you can, read it alongside others from your congregation or small group and share what God is teaching you.
- **Share** – Stay in touch via a WhatsApp group, or pick up the phone to speak with someone else from church at the same time each week. Use these opportunities to share what you find yourself going through and what you are learning.
- **Pray** – Develop a list of five people to pray for. Use this as a rhythm for your own prayer life, but also ask those on the list how you can be praying for them and encourage them that you will do so. Keep adding to the list in the weeks ahead.
- **Connect** – When church meetings or small group gatherings are less regular, try to connect with others for a short video call. Get someone to share a verse from Scripture that has spoken to them and take time to pray for one another.
- **Read** – Pick up a Christian book to read that will help you in your spiritual growth. If possible, aim to read it at the same time as others so that you can share what you are learning.
- **Walk with** – Order a copy of one of PCI's Proximity discipleship series. Invite a younger or older Christian to go through the eight sessions with you.

Pray

Sunday, 14 March

Pray with us from 7-8 pm, on Zoom if you are able.

Monday, 15 March

Read James 1:2-8.

Try *suggestions for developing a discipleship conversation.*

- **Start** – Start by asking, "What is God teaching you at this time?" Give space to reflect more deeply on the answer and time to listen.
- **Develop** – As you listen to what is being shared, consider if the response is a promise to be remembered, a truth to live by, a challenge to step into, or a sin from which to repent. Develop the conversation by asking, "How do you think you need to respond to what you've been learning?"
- **Encourage** – Share one encouraging thought in response to what has been said. It might be a short Bible passage, a relevant example from your own life, or some of your own reflections linked to what the other person is learning.
- **Next steps** – Suggest some simple next steps by pointing to any helpful resources, books, podcasts or opportunities that might help shape further thinking or develop response.

- **Pray** – Ask for something in particular for which prayer is needed. Then pray. Keep it short, simple and tailored to what you know of where this person is on their journey of faith – still searching, new believer, long time follower of Jesus.

Pray through these suggestions and commit to trying one in the coming week.

Tuesday, 16 March

Read James 1:2-8.

Follow up?

[Proximity](#) is a series of short booklets providing biblical content and practical questions on a range of discipleship themes usable in one-to-one or small group discussion.

Pray about what God is leading your congregations to do for now to follow Jesus together.



For now – encouraging young people

Just now: when the flock is scattered

We often don't focus a lot on the place of young people in the life of our congregation, because we know they have their own age-related groups and activities and we have a general sense of whether or not they are regularly attending these programmes. For now, things are very different as the Covid-19 pandemic has robbed our young people of much of the regular structure provided by familiar activities in both church and wider life. Some of them may be around at Sunday services, or appear to some extent in what we are able to do for now, but how well are they staying connected and what messages are they getting about how important they still are to us?

Wednesday, 17 March

Read Luke 15:1-7.

Watch a short introduction to this session by clicking [here](#) or read its transcript below.

For now, just about everything about church life is difficult, due to the restrictions arising from Covid-19. We face the challenge of having to think differently and wondering what we can do. One of the questions we find ourselves asking is, "How can we encourage young people around our church?" I wonder what you have found challenging about that.

At this time, it's difficult to retain connection with young people, because most of our usual programs have stopped. Jesus' parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15 reminds us of the importance of each and every young person in our congregation. Now is an important moment to think about things like:

- how do we measure the value of what we're doing when numbers aren't what we're used to?
- why might young people not be engaging with what we're doing?
- what simple things can we do to let young people know we value and care for them and want to support them in this time of upheaval in just about every area of their lives?
- how could you have a congregation with a young person that might mean the world to them just now?

For now, it's so important to focus on the simple things and find one thing that we *can* do engage and encourage young people in this next season of church life.

Graeme Thompson, Youth Development Officer

Pray

Thursday, 18 March

Read Luke 15:1-7.

Think about *the value of every one.*

The backdrop against which Jesus tells this parable is the discomfort of the Pharisees with how He welcomed sinners – those usually overlooked, or looked down upon by many. However, the story He unfolds teaches us about the value God places on each individual in His family, the Church.

1. Jesus' parables usually contain a surprise and a challenge as part of the tale. What is surprising about the attitude of the shepherd in this story? What challenge does it bring to us today as churches which often find ourselves measuring the value of what we do by numbers of those attending our carefully planned programmes?

2. In the current situation, we may just be glad to see whoever is able to come attending whatever we are able to do. How does this passage remind us of the importance of doing what we can for 'our ninety-nine' - those who regularly show up at whatever we try to do?

Pray

Friday, 19 March

Read Luke 15:1-7.

Think about *the value of every one.*

3. Think back again to the conversation to which Jesus was responding in telling this parable (vv.1-2). What similar attitudes and value judgements made by the Pharisees might we make towards young people who, for now, are not attending or engaging with our efforts to keep them connected? How might we be jumping to conclusions and not fully understanding why that might be happening?

4. What does the effort the sheep owner exerts to find his one lost sheep (vv.4-5) tell us about what it looks like to value each individual in our church family? How do you think young people in particular would feel if they sensed the church cared about them in this way? Are there particular young people around your church who might be 'the one' for whom you need to make extra efforts just now?

Pray

Saturday, 20 March

Read Luke 15:1-7.

Consider *ways we can encourage and value young people.*

There are straightforward ways we can practically demonstrate to every individual young person that they matter as part of our church just now.

- **A simple greeting** – there is huge value in a simple “hi” with a wave after church, or in the street. It communicates “I know you – I see you - you matter to me”.
- **A follow-up system** – to help avoid ‘the one’ getting lost, make a list of all your young people. Divide the names among leaders so that they can keep track of their engagement in church and any youth activities you are able to run.
- **Multiple communication methods** – young people use a variety of means of communication and social media, so we may need to try something different or keep experimenting until we find the most effective way to keep in touch.
- **Worship services** – be aware of the presence of teenagers’ in worship, especially if they are not usually there. Using inclusive language and illustrations, or providing tools to help them engage, can help them feel part of what is going on.
- **Small groups** – this youth ministry favourite is working especially well these days, as it can cope with changes in restrictions by moving between online and face to face work.
- **Gifts** – a carefully chosen Christian book or Bible reading resource sent to every young person could have a big impact and gives opportunity for follow-up.
- **Playing their part** – are there ways young people can serve and contribute actively to church life now?

Pray

Sunday, 21 March

Pray with us from 7-8 pm, on Zoom if you are able.

Monday, 22 March

Read Luke 15:1-7.

Try *suggestions for having a conversation with young people.*

- **Everyone can do it** – young people love it when any adult shows they care enough to say hello. Any connection counts, however simple.
- **Avoid over-complicating it** – start with a “hi”, establish eye contact. Use their name if you know it. Ask if you don’t. Don’t be put off by initial awkwardness. It does not mean they want you to stop talking to them.
- **The power of simple, open-ended questions** – ask questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer. “What have you been up to? What’s life like for you these days? What usual activities are you missing out on just now?”
- **Have a quiet word with parents** – a simple question to the parent of a teenager will be appreciated and opens doors to better conversations. “How is she getting on through all of this? I’m sure he’s missing out on a lot these days? How can we pray for her?”

- **Walk in their shoes** – try to understand things from the perspective of a young person, rather than assuming you know what it is like because you were once their age in a very different world. A caring question is better than an adult who comes across like they know it all.
- **Just listen to them** – if you get a young person onto their pet subject – football, Dr. Who, computer games, or some obscure hobby – just listen to them for as long as you can. You are giving them a huge gift. Focused adult attention can be in short supply these days.

Pray through these suggestions and commit to trying one in the coming week.

Tuesday, 23 March

Read Luke 15:1-7.

Follow up?

Watch this [short video](#), 'Engaging with Teenagers', by youth ministry teacher Professor Duffy Robbins for some simple tips for listening to young people.

Pray about what God is leading you to do for now to encourage young people in your church.



For *now* – sharing our faith

Just *now*: revisiting the focus of our witnessing life

Toddler groups, bowling clubs and uniformed organisations have been at the front edge of local outreach within PCI congregations for decades, and yet for many churches the current and ever-changing restrictions mean they are unable to take place safely at present. The same can be said for much of what we might have considered the outward focus of church life. With so much time and energy taken up with making arrangements for Sunday services and attending to pastoral needs, it can be easy to see why sharing our faith may have slipped down the agenda. Perhaps, for now, our focus needs to shift from activities and programmes to what simple steps we can take to sharpen the impact of our witness to those with whom we have regular contact and converse with in our everyday lives.

Wednesday, 24 March

Read Acts 19:8-10.

Watch a short introduction to this session by clicking [here](#) or read its transcript below.

For now, just about everything about church life is difficult, due to the restrictions arising from Covid-19. We face the challenge of having to think differently and wondering what we can do. One of the questions we find ourselves asking is, “How can we take simple, everyday opportunities to share our faith when many of our usual church outreach activities and programmes have ground to a halt?” I wonder what you have found challenging about that. Acts 19 contains a story that has lots to teach us at this time about how to be an effective witness to family, friends and neighbours in this time of ongoing pandemic. Now is a good moment to be thinking about:

- how this might represent a different challenge than inviting people to come to church or some other evangelistic event at our church,
- how we might actually be at a moment of great opportunity to reach a wider audience than ever with the good news of the gospel,
- the importance of the tone and tenor of what we say and good questions to ask which get others to think more deeply about all that’s going on just now, and
- simple ways in which we can grow the reach of our everyday witness and develop conversations which open the way to sharing our faith.

For now, it’s so important to be open and ready to seize the moment, to share our faith, as God gives us opportunity in our everyday relationships with others.

Neil Harrison, Mission Development Officer

Pray

Thursday, 25 March

Read Acts 19:8-10.

Think about *sharing your faith with others.*

These verses have a lot to teach us about what regaining outward focus as a congregation might look and feel like against the backdrop of continuing restrictions, as we concentrate on being a personal witness to our family, friends and neighbours.

1. Paul had been teaching about the kingdom of God to his own people, the Jews, in the familiar surroundings of the synagogue for months. However, opposition arose and restrictions meant he was no longer allowed to use the building (vv.8- 9). How might Paul have felt about this? In what ways can we relate this to our experience of feeling restricted in the use of our buildings for witness just now?

2. Verse 10 tells us that Paul's new location and setting for witness enabled a much wider audience to hear the good news. What new forms of bearing witness to others have you found as a congregation either in your local community or online during the period of the pandemic? How might these present an opportunity to witness to a wider audience who were previously beyond the reach of your normal church activities?

Pray

Friday, 26 March

Read Acts 19:8-10.

Think about *sharing your faith with others.*

3. Verses 8-9 highlight a change of tone from 'arguing persuasively' in the synagogue to 'discussions daily' in the lecture hall. Why might the tone of our witness need to change if we are to effectively share our faith with others for now? What words would you use to describe what that tone should be? What kind of simple questions might open up a fruitful conversation?

4. The audience might be different and the tone more gentle, but Paul's message of the gospel remains the same (vv.8,10) and many chose to follow Jesus (read on to verse 26). What particular aspects of how the gospel helps us to make sense of suffering and personally navigate difficult times might most connect with people at this time? What parts of our own story of experiencing the period of the Covid-19 pandemic as followers of Jesus might be most helpful to share?

Pray

Saturday, 27 March

Read Acts 19:8-10.

Consider ways to develop a more effective everyday witness.

- **Noticing** – a starting point to knowing anyone is noticing them. This is not only the first step in becoming aware of another person, but also in paying attention to God’s activity in our world. By paying greater attention to others, we create an opportunity to get to know them, and recognise them as treasured creations of God.
- **Praying** – pray for those we meet in our day-to-day life and ask God to show us what He wants to do to bless them. By doing so, we become more invested in their lives and more compassionate and loving towards them.
- **Welcoming** – welcome people by valuing their presence so that they feel comfortable with us. This is a way of living. We do it well by maximising the following welcoming aspects:
 - Our face: our smile might be hidden behind a mask for now, but warm eye contact can go a long way to making people feel welcomed and comfortable.
 - Our space: make people feel at ease in your presence. Even with social distancing, try to limit any awkwardness by finding common ground in conversation.
 - Our place: the ever-changing restrictions present difficulties in showing hospitality, but as things ease, seek to provide a comfortable place that allows people to feel more relaxed and accepted.
 - Our grace: accept people as they are and build relationship at an appropriate pace. Walk alongside others and admit your own flaws and need for God’s grace.
- **Loving** – genuinely love people and see them through God’s eyes. Remember that ‘love may sometimes feel, but it always acts’ (Romans 5:8).

Pray

Sunday, 28 March

Pray with us from 7-8 pm, on Zoom if you are able.

Monday, 29 March

Read Acts 19:8-10.

Try suggestions for sharing your faith in conversation.

- **Watching** – pay attention to current news items or regular conversation topics that might offer connection in conversation to the better story of Jesus. What stories picture brokenness, offer hope, contrast with the gospel message, or seem to mirror it? As these stories come up in conversation, be ready to ask a subtle question, or offer a different perspective, that moves towards a faith perspective.
- **Listening** – listen to others with genuine care, interest, and empathy and do not rush to offer your own opinions too quickly.
- **Questioning** – be more curious in your conversations, drawing others out with gentle questions that invite a more meaningful conversation. A natural order of questioning that deepens relationship might explore:
 - History (e.g. how have you been managing since the start of the pandemic last March?)

- Journey (e.g. what have been the major turning points, both ups and downs?)
- Present (e.g. where do you find yourself now?)
- Hopes (e.g. what are you longing for and looking forward to in the days ahead?)

Pray through these suggestions and commit to trying one in the coming week.

Tuesday, 30 March

Read Acts 19:8-10.

Follow up?

Explore more about how we can be more aware of God's prompting to be His witness in our everyday lives and relationships by watching this [YouTube video](#) by Andy Frost on Acts 17.

Pray about what God is leading you to do for now to share His good news with others.

Wednesday, 31 March

Read John 17:20-26.

Reflect: As this season of Lent draws to a close, take a moment to ponder Jesus' prayer for all believers in the Garden of Gethsemane the night He was betrayed.

How has Jesus made the Father known to you through the working of the Holy Spirit over these past six weeks?

What has He taught us about being His Church in these unusual times?