

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York are calling for Church of England churches to put public worship on hold and become a “different sort of church” in the coming months to face the challenge of coronavirus.

In a joint letter, Archbishops Justin Welby and John Sentamu said it was now necessary to put public services on hold until further notice.

But they said that far from having to “shut up shop”, the Church of England must face the challenge by becoming a radically different kind of church rooted in prayer and serving others.

It comes after the Government announced unprecedented peacetime measures to try to control the spread of the virus, with restrictions on public gatherings, transport and working.

The Archbishops expressed the desire that church buildings may, where practical, remain open as places of prayer for the community, observing social distancing recommendations.

They also invited clergy to maintain the ancient pattern of daily prayer and, where possible, the eucharist – live streaming their worship if they have the resources to do so.

And they urged congregations to be in the forefront of providing practical care and support for the most poor and the most vulnerable during the crisis.

“Being a part of the Church of England is going to look very different in the days ahead,” they wrote.

“Our life is going to be less characterised by attendance at church on Sunday, and more characterised by the prayer and service we offer each day.

“We may not be able to pray with people in the ways that we are used to, but we can certainly pray for people. And we can certainly offer practical care and support.

“Please do carry on supporting the local foodbank and buy extra provisions for it. Ensure the night shelters wherever possible are kept open. There are many very

encouraging schemes happening right across our country in communities to focus on caring for the most vulnerable and do continue to play your part in those.

“Then by our service, and by our love, Jesus Christ will be made known, and the hope of the gospel – a hope that can counter fear and isolation - will spread across our land.”

They added: “This is a defining moment for the Church of England. Are we truly are a church for all, or just the church for ourselves.

“We urge you sisters and brothers to become a different sort of church in these coming months: hopeful and rooted in the offering of prayer and praise and overflowing in service to the world.”

The archbishops have joined other church leaders in calling for a day of prayer and action this Sunday (Mothering Sunday) particularly remembering those who are sick or anxious and all involved in health and emergency services.

Further information on what the suspension of public worship will mean will be available as soon as possible on the Church of England website. This page will be regularly updated.

The Church will be providing a range of resources to enable people to continue to walk with God at this difficult time. This includes *#LiveLent* daily reflections, prayer for the day audio and text and Alexa and Google Home smart speaker apps.

In the days and weeks ahead, the Church will be significantly expanding this output with audio of a simple daytime prayer and night prayer service, more video content and some live-streaming, new mental health reflections to support people, and webinars to help churches stream sermons, events and make the most of social media. Read more here. The aim will be to make as much as possible available in simple downloadable and printable formats for those who can't easily access the technology.