



'SOCIALLY UNDISTANCED'

Social Responsibility Sunday 2021 – A look at our calling in a society changed by the Covid19 pandemic.

Dear friends

Welcome to the material for this year's Social Responsibility Sunday, which should be marked during January 2021. Given the upheaval to every aspect of society in the past year, it seemed very fitting that for this year's service we would have a look at our responsibility to this challenged society.

The pandemic and our governments' responses to it have greatly challenged us as individuals in the outworking of everyday life. Many are experiencing great loss and readjusting to a new reality as a result of Covid19 and the impact of it in other ways. As churches, we are also so aware of the impact that it has had on our function in terms of pastoral care, communal worship and fellowship.

However, the church has a responsibility to engage with wider society during 'normal' times and so it most definitely has a responsibility now. As citizens of the Kingdom of God living out our lives as citizens of the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland (or elsewhere) we need to recognise our calling in today's society. Many, many people are suffering in a wide variety of ways. Many have questions. Many are without hope. Many are getting by. Many are struggling. Many just need a little encouragement. It's time for the followers of Jesus to share and be the Good News in our countryside and streets.

We pick up on the words of Jesus as expressed in The Message. 'No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day.' (Luke 9:62) And we reflect on the people in exile in Jeremiah's time needing to work out how to live well in a different society.

Included in the material is...

A sample sermon on the theme.

Intercessory prayers that reflect on some of the issues of our societal responsibility.

A video of CSR members highlighting some aspects of the work of CSR in the context of the times we're in.

Some potential hymns/songs that may also lend themselves to someone speaking as prayers.

A reminder of our previously issued 'Covid19: Our Social Responsibility'.

In CSR it is our desire that the church would always be clear that it has a 'social responsibility', locally and nationally. We know that Methodists are glad to see the church engaged in wider society. Please help us engage well. With some limitations we may not be able to cover every topic going, but we are open to hearing how to help the church's witness in this regard. Also, if you have particular stories of churches living out social justice in a local area, please do send them in for us to highlight on the facebook page or elsewhere.

God bless you!

David, Steven, Hazel and Liz.

The Chairpersons and Secretaries of the Council on Social Responsibility

READINGS Jeremiah 29:1-9

Luke 9:51-62 (we recommend this being read from 'The Message')

SAMPLE SERMON

Socially Undistanced

The Covid19 pandemic has affected each of us and it has affected us as a society. So we need to both look after ourselves and we have a responsibility to wider society. Somehow we need to get the balance of care for ourselves, but also to be active and engaged with our communities and society.

The pandemic and our nations' response to it, has changed us and how we operate. We are in a constantly changing society anyway. Our response must not be to retreat. The world doesn't need Jesus' followers to do that. To be Christ's disciples in today's world is to announce Christ's Kingdom. Jesus said, "No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day." (Luke 9:62 Msg)

The people in exile, in Jeremiah's time, were tempted to long for getting back to 'normal'. Of course, they experienced a very different disruption than we have. The destruction of Jerusalem with the whole population fled, killed or taken into exile to Babylon.

As we come close to a year since the first restrictions kicked in to combat the Covid19 pandemic, we will feel a deep longing to be able to return from the exile that it has caused. We will have not been able to mix with all the people we would have wanted to during the Christmas season. We long for the normal interactions, human contact, celebrations and community that make life what we know it as.

The false prophet Hananiah told the exiled Israelites that within two years they would be back in Jerusalem. (Jeremiah 28:2-4) Who wouldn't want to hear that?! Except, it wasn't true. Jeremiah needed to come along with a different message from God. They wouldn't be returning anytime soon, and they needed to thrive in the setting that they were in.

We begin 2021 believing that at some point this year things may begin to get back to normal. We also would be glad to hear any statement that said that all will be over within two years. And of course, we want to see an end to the death, illness, restrictions, social isolation and disruption of this pandemic well within the two years.

The exiles were instructed by God, through Jeremiah, to live well in this new setting. It was very different, but they were to invest in life there, and work out what it would mean to thrive in this new environment.

In church circles over the past ten months, many have recognised that we can't automatically return to doing things in our worship, fellowship and church business in the way we previously did without thinking things through. But when it comes to our social consciousness, we must radically consider our calling in this era.

We live in a society where many have experienced tragic loss. Many are living with the deep pressures on their mental health. Many know the pain of isolation and loneliness. Many are without jobs or have an insecure financial position. Many have lost hope after seeing their dreams or plans shattered by the pandemic. And of course, many will have thrived too or found a new positive direction.

In any case, if ever there was a time when the followers of Jesus needed to be engaged in bringing hope, healing and restoration in society, it is now. If ever there was a time to find love-filled imaginative ways to bless wider society, that time is 2021. If ever there was a time to step out, take risks of faith, be willing to look a bit silly for the sake of the kingdom of God, surely it's this time.

Jesus' young disciples didn't get it quite right when seeking to respond to their social responsibility. Calling for people to be incinerated because of lack of hospitality and sectarianism wasn't exactly the Jesus way! (Luke 9:53-55) But in recognising the need for the Good News to be made known, Jesus was clear about the challenge to all who would call themselves his followers... 'First things first. Your business is life, not death. And life is

urgent: Announce God's kingdom! ... No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day.' (Luke 9:60, 62 MSG)

The Kingdom of God is 'how God is taking charge of the world,' as Tom Wright (theologian) puts it.

As Mike Frost (missiologist) says about the Kingdom of God,

'It looks like love, justice, peace, joy, and hope.

It looks like the subversion of toxic religious leadership.

It looks like healing, wholeness and reconciliation.

It looks like freedom.

It looks like forgiveness and mercy.

It looks like preferential treatment for children, the poor and the disabled.

It looks like the end of all suffering.'

How can we, from our local churches, live out that in our local context? It may challenge some local ways of doing things in our bit of the countryside or our part of town. The thing that makes the kingdom of God known may not be what's normally expected of our background. Or we may have to try something new or very different. But we hear the call to seek first the Kingdom of God and all these other things will added to us. And in this way, to be socially UNdistanced.

It has been a rough time for churches and in many ways, we face many challenges ahead. However, we will be more alive if we recognise and step out into our social responsibility. Let's hear the call from Jeremiah – to seek, work and pray for society's welfare. And let's hear the call from our Master – to seize the day for God's kingdom.

History, from Spanish flu or other examples, may suggest that while change is what we are going through right now, society will 'get back to normal' soon. The desire for comfort and peace as well as greed or power will kick in. That underlines our need to hear Jesus' sense of urgency about living out the life of his kingdom. Take rest in God in our devotion to him, but from that place live faithfully and enthusiastically in the society of 2021.

POTENTIAL HYMNS

The following are some suggestions that may be suitable as hymns or to be used as prayers within the service. The numbers on the left are from 'Singing the Faith'.

167	Colours of day dawn into the mind	
251	Jesus Christ is waiting, waiting in the streets	
256	When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?	
257	Would you walk by on the other side when someone called for aid?	
499	Great God, your love has called us here	
547	Beyond these walls of worship in the stress and joy of life	
550	Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go, my daily labour to pursue	HP 381
611	Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you	
618	Sacred the body God has created	
653	O Christ the healer, we have come, to pray for health, to plead for friends	HP 395
654	The love of God comes close, where stands an open door	
659	As dawn awakes another day, the working sphere rolls into view	
693	Beauty of brokenness, hope for despair	
696	For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord	HP402
699	God of justice, Saviour to all, came to rescue the weak and the poor	
700	God weeps at love withheld, at strength misused	
702	I will speak out for those who have no voices	
707	Make me a channel of your peace`	HP 776
	Jesus' hands were kind hands, doing good to all	HP 393
	Your will for us and others, Lord, Is perfect health and wholeness	HP 398

PRAYERS REFLECTING OUR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Ever present God, as unimaginable as you are, you have not kept distant from us.

Forgive us for our distancing from you. We confess our sin and not living in the intimacy of your presence.

Immanuel, God with us, come close to us in our need of you as we journey through these testing times.

We ask for your strength upon all medical staff within our hospitals as they deal with this unprecedented emergency. For all who put themselves at risk and who live with the pressures of human suffering, resources, time and difficult choices. Help those who work or reside within our nursing homes.

Undistanced God... *hear our prayer*

We pray for encouragement, companionship and hope for those who are suffering from pressures to their mental health. Enable us to live out the beauty of your kingdom in compassion, in listening, in time, and in the resourcing of needed services. May we be community at its best.

Undistanced God... *hear our prayer*

Guide our leaders at this time

(At 1/1/21... South: An Taoiseach Micheál Martin, An Tánaiste Leo Varadkar, Health Minister: Stephen Donnelly, Education Minister: Norma Foley. North: First Minister Arlene Foster, Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill, Health Minister: Robin Swann, Education Minister: Peter Weir. Prime Minister Boris Johnston.)

Give them wisdom and joy, listening spirits and a commitment to the good of all in society

Undistanced God... *hear our prayer*

As our nations get used to the new arrangements for how business operates around this island, north and south, and in Great Britain and mainland Europe... as we mark the centenary of the founding of Northern Ireland... as we work through the legacy of conflict...

Deepen our commitment to put the life of your kingdom first. Give us courage in reconciliation, peace-making and listening. And sustain us in our everyday life and work.

Undistanced God... *hear our prayer*

God of all the world, give us a greater appreciation of our variety and shared humanity. May difference in ability, ethnic origin, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious or political affiliation or age not prevent us from working for your glory and the benefit of all. May the good news be heard with our lives and voices of compassion and action in society as well as within our churches.

Undistanced God... *hear our prayer*

As we have been forced to slow down and re-examine our priorities and assumptions of life, so give us new vision for a healthier world. God of life, as some industry halted, planes were grounded and land traffic ceased, we could see your world a bit more clearly.

Forgive us for our greed and exploitation of our planet. Waken us to the destruction involved in the endless pursuit of wealth, comfort and economies that suit the rich. Renew the commitment of nations to work for a cleaner world.

Undistanced God... *hear our prayer*

God who comes alongside, hear the cry of the forgotten. For those trapped in danger and subject to abuse by the shutdowns. In their homes, in slavery, in low expectations of life, in cycles of poverty. Break the chains of oppression. Thwart the plans of the oppressors. And break our unwillingness to respond where we can. Sincerely, open up the doors that are there beside us. Expose the injustices in our area to the light and love of God and open our eyes to that which has been hidden - for us to live out Christ's compassion.

Undistanced God... *hear our prayer*

May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name. Amen.