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Dear sisters and brothers,

Thank you to all the clergy and lay readers who were able to attend the service of *Renewal of Ministry Commitment* online yesterday. It was wonderful to see so many faces on the screen and to be together in a different way. As long as this crisis continues, I would hope that we can meet again in the same way from time to time. Many of you asked for a copy of the Charge from the service, and it forms the remainder of this letter.

This is a Holy Week like never before. Thank you for all that you are doing to help your congregations and communities, in such uncertain and challenging times, to celebrate that Christ is risen, is risen indeed. People who look at your websites or newsletters can see the creative energy that you are giving to the task of enabling worship and pastoral care, and it is keeping them connected to each other and to the Church, especially this week.

But if you are like me; you were not trained for anything like this situation. So I hope you are also caring for yourself and your colleagues, and for those you live with. Not only that you will stay well and safe, but because it is tempting, when we find ourselves cut off from the forms of ministry we have always exercised, for us to become 'activist' in new and different way, and to 'burn out.'

The suspension of public worship and meetings has not made our ministry less intense, on the contrary it is more so. We have to keep contact with our congregations and that takes time; we have to keep them informed and involved; we have to look out for the vulnerable and their needs; we have to check on the safety of our buildings; we will maybe have to conduct many funerals, support grieving families, and help our communities to acknowledge and lament the tide of loss that has begun to sweep over them. The media are not focusing much on this reality, the increasing number of deaths in hospitals and care homes and at home. Every death means a family and a community in shock and loss, and we are among those who must be prepared to listen, to pray, to comfort, to weep with those who weep.

And all of this will become increasingly hard to do, so I want to urge you to pay attention to your own well-being: to rely on the supportive disciplines of prayer you have developed, to stay in touch with your spiritual directors and colleagues, to accept the love and care of family and friends, and to '*stir up the gift that has been placed in you.*'

Because the most useful gift we have been given, and that we need to 'stir up' at times like this, is not about activism or busyness at all. I have gone back many times to something Monica Furlong wrote about ministry in the 1960s, and I go back to it now:

I want the clergy to be people who can dare, as I do not dare, and as few of my contemporaries dare, to refuse to work flat out, to refuse to compete with me in strenuousness. I want them to be people who are secure enough in the value of what they are doing to have time to read, to sit and think, and who can face the emptiness and possible depression which often attack people when they do not keep the surface of their mind occupied. I want them to be people who have faced this kind of loneliness and discovered how fruitful it was, as I want them to be people who have faced the problems of prayer. I want them to be people who can sit still without feeling guilty, and from whom I can learn some kind of tranquillity in a society which has almost lost the art.

That feels more relevant and challenging to me right now, as a vision for priesthood and ministry, than it has ever done.

Like me you probably meet some people who are wondering when things will return to normal, and others who question whether there can ever be a return to normal after such sudden and profound dislocation. This week we are celebrating, and praying for, Resurrection in the life of the world and the life of the Church. But, as Michael Paterson said the other day, "Resurrection is not about going back to the way things were, but about transformation of what was into something at first unrecognisable."

Can the world simply go back to the way it was? - when we've realised that the environment does well when we do less; that the gap between rich and poor has been made even clearer, globally as well as locally; that we need our health-care and supermarket and essential service workers; that we need direction and action from government for the common good (as Rowan Williams said recently, 'the sacred cows of capitalism are being sent to the slaughterhouse'); and that we need each other.

Can the church simply go back to the way it was? - when we've realised that while church buildings may be closed the Church of God is still open; that financially supporting our church need not depend on passing a collection plate; that prayer does not happen only in church; and that not all meetings are essential, while others work well online.

For me, the biggest realisation is about Discipleship. We've been saying for years that faith is not lived out in church but at home, at work and in the world. But in this crisis faith has, literally, come home.

People who haven't done this very much are now starting to consider, what is important in my life? And what is important in my church life? They are discovering that being a member of the Church now depends, not on what the priest or the pastor or the institution can do for them, but on what they can do for themselves. They are asking us for guidance, support, and prayer, but they are responding in their own way and by their own calling.

They are looking for ways of praying alone and with others: lighting a candle, reading the bible, being still. They are expressing active faith as volunteers. Without using that term so beloved of Church hierarchies, they are engaging with 'intentional discipleship.' And the challenge we now have as priests and pastors is not just to move what we used to do onto the internet, but to find genuinely different ways of supporting people on that journey of discipleship.

In the end it may be this, rather than all our new-learned technical skills in live-streaming worship, which will be the deepest and most far-reaching effect of this time. That will be its gift, its "transformation of what was into something at first unrecognisable."

But I don't think the gift will come from all our creativity, energy and activism in this crisis, needed and appreciated as they are. I think it will be directly linked to our own daily struggle, in this crisis, to remain both faithful and real in prayer and in priestly and pastoral identity. To quote Monica Furlong again,

It may be true that it is only in so far as the clergy start by exploring their inner loneliness and its relation to Christian belief that all their hard work is going to reach others who, for one reason or another, are alone, and so begin to heal our society.

After this time of struggle it may be that we will all have learned again what it is to be disciples of Jesus Christ and not just members of the Scottish Episcopal Church. So that when the Church - the ekklesia, those 'called together' - is able to gather once more to celebrate the eucharist and baptism together and 'taste and see how gracious the Lord is,' we may find, in T.S. Eliot's words, that "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time."

With prayer for all on the day of Christ's Passion, and looking to his Resurrection,

Bishop Ian