

Brethren and Companions,

It is remarkably over 80 days since we have been in lockdown mode, but I know that those who continue to isolate and self-distance are adapting as best they can to these ever-changing circumstances.

Can I begin by saying how pleased I am to see that the West Kent Emergency Fund is continuing its excellent work and that an increasing number of community beneficiaries and members are being supported with financial assistance at this challenging time. We continue to do excellent work in the community, evidenced by the superb number of letters of appreciation being received – thanking us for our support – and it's good to see that many of these stories appear in the online version of Freemasonry Today.

The recent edition of our revised West Kent News magazine, which focussed exclusively on our COVID-19 related activities, was extremely well received and I am sure that you'll join me in congratulating our Communication team, especially Adrian Grant, for a job well done.

The next edition will be an engaging and comprehensive publication, with contributions from every member of our Provincial team – it will be with you by the end of the month, and periodically thereafter. I believe that this will prove a useful and effective communication tool for those who do not visit our Provincial website on a regular basis, nor participate in our social media channels.

An ongoing concern of mine is the effect that enforced isolation continues to have on our mental wellbeing. Discussions ensue at United Grand Lodge of England, Masonic Charitable Foundation and with neighbouring Provinces to establish what new medium – and longer-term – initiatives we may be able to support, to assist those who are caring for others. Our own Provincial Welfare team is working on an exciting project which will provide a support mechanism for those who require a listening ear and a caring arm around them.

I've been humbled at the correspondence and emails I have received from members who unexpectedly received an appointment or promotion recently, and those who were promoted to Past Provincial Senior Grand Warden, given the recent review to the terms of reference to our cherished Invicta Award. As always, we will continue to strive to do all we can to recognise the talent we have within our ranks.

You should all have received an email from United Grand Lodge featuring "First Rising", its new communications tool for its members. Contained therein were a number of interesting items, not least details of a proposed exit strategy from our Masonic suspension. I dare say that, in due course, updates will undoubtedly follow, once further guidance and advice is received from government sources. Naturally, whilst member welfare is – and always will be – our over-riding concern, it is essential that we remain COVID-19 secure in 2020 and beyond.

I know many of you are anxious about either not being able to attend meetings, if restricted to a small number of participants or otherwise, feeling compelled to attend when you might not wish to do so. Whilst there are those that may wish to return to meetings asap, my overriding view is that we have a duty of care for your welfare and that remains of paramount importance to me. The choice of whether to attend meetings will always remain yours – and yours alone – and you should participate in physical form only when you feel that you wish to.

Ian Macknelly, our Provincial Grand Superintendent of Works, has been in regular liaison with our Centres, who have benefitted from over £140,000 of grants due to his professional advice, and are now busy ensuring that each of them is COVID-19 ready, and can accommodate all relevant requirements.

Since March, we have witnessed a huge increase in virtual member engagement, with Zoom video conferences very prevalent, whilst we have been preoccupied with ensuring member welfare and retention. Following our traditional summer break in July-August, we are now actively planning forward for a variety of activities between Sept – December this year.

I have participated in hugely popular Zoom talks and lectures – one by a Grand Master of a Progressive Order, and another by a Prestonian lecturer, our very own Tony Harvey. These two events attracted almost 500 attendees, proving that there is huge interest in such events.

Accordingly, our Provincial Executive is actively working on a sizeable schedule of virtual events, to take place between September & December – which will be based on Social, Entertainment, Masonic or Training themes, and which you will all be very welcome to participate in.

Our first event will be on Monday 13 July, with a Zoom based “Ask the Provincial Grand Master – Grand Superintendent” event, similar to BBC’s Question Time, where any member will be able to submit a question on any topic of interest, or on which you would like further information – Daniel Spencer will act as our host for the evening and further details will be available in the next few days.

It is critical to ensure that Freemasonry remains as relevant, engaging and enjoyable as it ever was before the suspension. As we prepare to take our first tentative steps on the road towards a resumption of masonic activity, we should reflect on all that we have learnt during the past few months. We have made major strides forward in the recent past and I hope that our Province will emerge fitter, more engaged and even stronger in spirit than before.

I’m hopeful that in time to come, we will all be able to reconvene our Lodge and Chapter meetings, where we will be able to resume our camaraderie, but only when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, let’s continue to stay positive and support each other through this difficult time by staying alert, continue to take care of ourselves, and each other.