

Theology in Scotland on arts and culture

Churches Will Open for Private Prayer

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This poem describes the first time my husband (then fiancé) and I set foot inside a church following their closure as part of the UK lockdown which began in March 2020. Initially, churches opened for private prayer only, with social distancing measures such as one-way systems in place and the removal of soft furnishings and holy water to avoid contagion.

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The old signs are all in place, still:
A writhing, tortured body strung up
On two perpendicular planks,
Silently screaming just below the ceiling.
A stone font planted beside the door
In the shape of a hexagon:
Empty, though, bone dry because
We can't have holy water at the moment.
Water is a potential vector.
The soft furnishings have been removed:
The faded red kneelers, hand-knitted
By forgotten saints, long gone.



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And along with the old signs, new ones:
A complex scheme of bright blue arrows
Fixed with tape to the tiled floor.
And coloured stickers: Wash your hands,
Remain two metres apart,
Masks must be worn at all times. These signs
Jar oddly against the great, dark space
But it's very nice to be back for private prayer
And the golden box is lit up with a small candle
And a woman kneels beside it, weeping.