

CoronaVirus Emergency
Guidelines from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland
relating to
in-church Funerals

HoB Protocol 2020/03

(This protocol comes into effect when in-church services are allowed to commence)

Introduction

When permitted by the Government of Ireland in the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Assembly in Northern Ireland, the return to in-church worship in both jurisdictions will include in-church funeral services. This is to be welcomed as funerals are important pastoral occasions.

While the threat of CoronaVirus/Covid-19 continues, however, the sensitivities and caring associated with funerals must be matched with the same social distancing and hygiene measures introduced for all in-church worship.

Before opening a church building for a funeral, all provisions governing the re-opening of those buildings must be put in place first – see *Church of Ireland Return to In-Church Worship Protocols for Ro/I and NI*. The fundamental principles of good communication with parishioners, understanding and collaboration in the local community, hand hygiene, social distancing and respiratory hygiene as laid down (and revised from time to time) by public health authorities must be followed.

The following guidelines, specific to in-church funerals, were agreed on 15th June 2020. They supplement the guidance provided in the general protocols for the return to in-church worship and the re-opening of a church building.

Funeral Services – The Occasion

A funeral service is an occasion of immense significance to the family of the deceased, to close friends and the local community.

It is recognised that the current public health restrictions, in curtailing numbers and requiring very practical, necessarily sterile, arrangements to be put in place may affect, to some extent, the spirit of the occasion and in particular, the numbers that can be present in the church building, for the time being.

Any specific Public Health Guidelines concerning who may attend, the numbers attending such occasions and the guidance on social/physical distancing and the consequent capacity of a church building, must be followed. Clergy in both jurisdictions should keep abreast of these – Ro/I: www.gov.ie NI: www.nidirect.gov.uk

Funeral Services – Specific Guidelines

Before the Funeral Service

ACTION	COMMENT
Prepare the church – no additional actions	If the church has been used over the previous 72 hours (3 days), full cleaning will be required.
Speak with the undertaker/ funeral director	It is necessary that the undertaker/funeral director understands the expectations and undertakes to abide by the parish's in-church funeral protocol.
Speak with the family	The in-church funeral protocol should be explained to the family of the deceased so that they understand the reasoning for it at the current time. Numbers of immediate family and close friends should be agreed with the family/chief mourner. Mindful of the required social distancing measures, seats should be reserved for them at the front of the church.
Arrival of the coffin	The safest form is for the coffin (bearing the remains of the deceased – hereafter referred to as 'the coffin') to be brought to the church before the congregation arrives – perhaps the previous evening. This will enable an ordered arrival of congregation members with time and space to observe social distancing and hygiene measures. It is recommended that the coffin should be wheeled into and out of the church by two people – one at either end of it. The health and safety advice is that if the coffin is to be carried/shouldered, in non Covid-19 cases, only those from the same household should do so.
Arrival of the congregation	As the congregation arrives, they should be directed by a steward to their seats – preferably filled in order from behind the reserved seating at the front. When all the non-reserved seating (adhering to social distancing measures) is occupied, the overflow congregation must remain outside the church building.
Arrival of the family	If the family of the deceased and close friends are not arriving until close to the start of the service, in order to maintain social distancing they should avoid passing along the main aisle to their seats – but enter through a door near the front of the church. If this is not possible, an early arrival is recommended. (If the coffin arrives at the church as part of a cortege, the church should be filled from the front with all the social distancing and hygiene measures observed regardless of how long this takes. Stewards should be on hand to direct as necessary. When the church is full to social distancing capacity, the overflow congregation must remain outside the church building.)
Announcement	An announcement should be made before the service begins about the order and procedure for exiting the church at the end of the funeral service – see below. All members of the congregation should also be asked to disperse immediately on leaving the church building – or the churchyard if burial is to take place there (ideally, family and close friends only). A similar announcement about exiting and dispersing, placed at the end of the service sheet, is also recommended.

The Funeral Service

ACTION	COMMENT
No additional actions	The protocols for general in-church worship must be followed.

Leaving the Church

ACTION	COMMENT
The coffin and family...	Mourners should remain in their seats until the coffin and immediate family of the deceased and close friends exit the church building. It is recommended that the coffin should only be brought down the main aisle if it is being wheeled with, preferably, the family and close friends following in single file along the centre of the aisle. If, however, the coffin is to be carried down the main aisle, the pall-bearers should, if possible, be from the same household and seats immediately next to the aisle should be left vacant. Alternatively, the coffin followed by the family and close friends might leave via another door near the front of the church. If the family of the deceased waits outside to greet congregation members a blockage will occur. This is better avoided.
The congregation...	A steward should be on hand to direct the exiting of the congregation from the church building - beginning with those at the back. Others should be requested to wait in their places, not moving to the ends of pews, until they are directed by a steward to move to the door and on out of the building.

The Committal – if conducted in the adjoining churchyard

ACTION	COMMENT
Numbers	Observance of social distancing makes it impossible to allow large numbers to gather around a grave and public health restrictions may dictate numbers allowed to do so. Although out of doors, the safest practice is to confine the committal to the family of the deceased and close friends. This should be agreed beforehand with the family and an announcement made.
Greeting the family	A line of greeting is better avoided. It should be made clear that the family of the deceased is not expecting this to happen.
Dispersal	All should be asked to disperse with a minimum of delay. Clergy should lead by example and retire to the church vestry as soon as the committal is over.