

27th August 2021

Dear Colleagues,

I hope and trust that you have had some time of rest and refreshment over the summer months and are ready, in some way, for what lies ahead over the next number of months. As we begin a new season with lots of new opportunities there will also be many new challenges as we move further down the pathway to recovery. Some no doubt will be frustrated that the restrictions in church have not been eased before now but the very high number of new cases of covid-19 in the community in the last week has been a stark reminder that the virus is still prevalent and very much a reality in the world around us. We are also aware that the number of covid-related deaths over recent weeks has also risen. Our thoughts and prayers continue to be with all who are sick, fearful, and facing the sorrow of bereavement.

Although some restrictions have now moved from being mandatory under law to strongly recommended in government guidance those safeguards are still there for a reason. The majority of activities in the life of our Parishes may now resume with the permission of the Rector and Select Vestry and with appropriate mitigations in place and risk assessments performed. A cautious and slow return to normal might be the best way to describe it. There is absolutely no rush to get everything up and running again within days. Our journey through the pandemic has taken nearly a year and a half so far so it will take time for us to slowly rebuild and get our parishes up and running again.

Much of the NI Executive guidance that is available at the moment was written earlier in the summer but since then the transmission rate of the virus has risen. The following information and guidance may though be so some help as you prepare for the new season.

SOCIAL DISTANCING

In line with the changes in guidance that were issued by the NI Executive over the summer, from 1st September those attending acts of worship in our church buildings should stay **a minimum of 1 metre apart** and should not have close contact with anyone outside of their household. This includes all wedding and funeral services. The social distancing required for all non-worship indoor activities and meetings in church buildings will also be **a minimum of 1 metre** from 1st September 2021.

The distance of a minimum of 1 metre is in line with the new statutory requirement in Northern Ireland. Select Vestries in consultation with parishioners may feel that they wish to maintain more than 1 metre social distancing within their services of worship, or delay making changes for the time being and that is fully understandable. The change from 2 metres to at least 1 metre social distancing in services of worship will for many parishes make only a small difference. For those Parish Churches with fixed seating, it is likely an empty pew will still be needed between occupied pews.

In services of worship, those leading from the front should still aim to have 4 metres social distancing from the front row of the congregation. Ideally, singers who are leading worship should also continue to maintain 2 metres social distancing from each other if they are removing their face coverings to lead the singing.

RISK ASSESSMENTS

The reduction in social distancing from 2m to 1m will require adjusted risk assessments to give the new maximum number permissible in a church building or hall. New markings and signage may also be required. Select Vestry are responsible for producing a risk assessment for all parish properties which in turn must be signed off by organisations using the building. Any additional requirements should be agreed with the Rector and Select Vestry who are responsible for the safe working practices and health and safety protocols in their local context. They will also be well aware of the local needs and concerns in the Parish. The number of people permitted to attend a place of worship must still be determined by a careful risk assessment.

FACE COVERINGS

The legal requirement to wear a face covering in a place of worship, during an act of worship, may have been removed at the end of July, however it is still strongly advised, encouraged, and recommended that face coverings should be worn when gathering with other people for services. If congregational singing is part of an act of worship, then again it is strongly advised that face coverings are worn. It is still a legal requirement to wear a face covering when entering and exiting a church building. Face covering exemptions for medical reasons obviously apply. Face coverings must still be worn at any other activity taking place in a church building, except for seated business type meetings which are not accessible to the general public, seated events when food and beverages are to be consumed, and at children's activities as regulated by each organisation according to age group.

HAND SANITISERS

On entering and leaving a church building, everyone should wash or sanitise their hands.

CONTACT TRACING

Places of worship have been asked to still consider keeping a temporary record of visitors for 21 days but should seek consent from the visitor beforehand and ensure compliance with UK General Data Protection Regulations.

SUNDAY SCHOOLS AND YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

It will not be possible to get everything up and running all in one go particularly if large numbers are involved. A phased return may be more appropriate so as to be able to manage the numbers involved. It may mean that initially Sunday School meets in the Parish Hall during the Church service rather than children going out to the hall during the service. Again, this will depend on numbers and local risk assessment.

FUNERALS

As there is no longer a restriction on the numbers permitted to gather outdoors at a private dwelling, funeral services are once again permitted to be conducted at private homes when there is a negligible risk of transmitting COVID-19 infection. However, you should be aware that numbers inside the dwelling are still restricted to a maximum of 10 people from no more than 3 households. This number includes clergy/officiants but does not include children aged 12 or under. There is no limit to the number permitted to gather outdoors for a funeral service at a private dwelling.

CATERING

Catering on church premises is now possible provided risk assessments are carried out which include clear reference to the type of catering proposed. This is to ensure that all reasonable measures are both identified and put in place to limit the risk of transmission of Covid-19. These measures will include normal 'pre-covid' hygiene requirements should continue to be met; numbers using the kitchen should be kept to the minimum required; hand sanitiser should be generally available and those serving food/drinks should be careful to sanitise their hands regularly. Entry and exit should be carefully managed in line with Covid protocols, with queuing for refreshments/food avoided as much as possible – better to 'serve' people when they are seated. Social distancing should apply if queuing does have to take place (with face coverings worn) and people should be seated at tables. Individual disposable cups/plates should be used where possible, and care taken when disposing of empty cups etc and generally when cleaning up. When food is 'shared' it is best served on individual plates rather than taken by different people from one plate/box. This applies, for example, when pizza is brought in for a youth group, or when there is catering after a funeral.

There is a lot of work to be done and much rebuilding to take place but there is a great enthusiasm to get on with things, particularly so that people can meet safely together again, face to face, for worship and the other activities of the church. These guidelines are offered not to make life even more difficult but to try and keep everyone safe. It may be a slow and cautious return to what we once knew as 'normal', but we are hopefully, by the grace of God, heading in the right direction.

May God bless you in your work and in your ministry and may he keep you safe.

+John