



Coronavirus: Guidance for Church Officers on public worship in our buildings

Revision: September 2021

With the increasing roll-out of vaccines, some European countries have now significantly liberalised the legal regimes put in place to control Covid-19. According to the European Centre for Disease Control, across the EU/EEA some 73% of adults have now been fully vaccinated. There is a strong political and popular sense that countries want life to return to something much closer to normal for a range of good economic, social and psychological reasons.

At the same time, people can still contract the virus even though double vaccinated, and some of those may become seriously unwell. There remain sub-groups in many societies where vaccine take-up is low, including in our diocese, in Russia, Turkey and Morocco. Some experts, and some authorities, therefore, remain much more cautious, and there is continuing uncertainty on what might happen with the virus over the coming months. It is a stark global reality that over 4.5 million people have now died as a result of the Pandemic.

As Christian communities, we want to encourage the kind of flourishing spiritual and community life that is much better enabled when people gather without too much restriction. On the other hand, our commitment to love our neighbours as ourselves means we must have a particular care for vulnerable people. All chaplaincy councils will need to weigh these different considerations. This will require careful and mature analysis of risks at a local level, bearing in mind that different people may have for good medical or psychological reason different risk profiles.

In any country, the advice of the national government is of the first importance and must be consulted. Clergy and chaplaincy councils need to pay close attention to national/provincial regulations, as well as drawing on the advice of our ecumenical partners.

Where national, regional or local law and guidance are more liberal than Diocesan Guidance, chaplains and chaplaincy councils are free to adopt local rules, if they so decide. Responsibility for these decisions rests with the chaplaincy council.

Hygiene practices for individuals attending Church

- Those with symptoms of Covid-19 or other respiratory or flu-like illness, or an elevated temperature, or who are particularly vulnerable to infection should not attend public services, but join worship, as available, online.
- For individuals attending church: carrying of tissues and using them to catch coughs and sneezes, and binning the tissue continues to be important. Some individuals and families will wish to carry a small bottle of hand sanitiser.

- In some countries and some chaplaincies mask wearing in church will continue to be observed. If a national jurisdiction permits worship without masks, then the chaplain and chaplaincy council should decide whether (or not) they wish to request members of the congregation to attend public worship wearing a mask. Those who have a formal part in the liturgy (presiding, preaching, reading, interceding) may continue to remove their face mask when they are actually speaking.
- Disinfectants and hand washing/sanitizing facilities should be provided at the church entrance; door handles and hand railings need to be disinfected on a regular basis.
- Good ventilation is increasingly understood to be an important measure in controlling Covid-19. Where possible, and as the weather allows, entrance and exit doors should be secured in an open position from before the time when people gather for the service until after the last worshipper has left.

Welcoming at Church

- All sidespeople/welcomers should wash their hands with an alcohol-based sanitizer. Handshaking and other physical touch continue to be discouraged. The ministry of welcome remains important and responsible lay people such as churchwardens should be directly involved in it, whilst being careful to observe appropriate physical distance.
- In a small number of jurisdictions contact tracing requires that a register is kept of all attendees at a service.
- We encourage people to remain mindful that some of those around them may wish to continue to observe physical distancing. This may apply to seating (as below) as well as to informal gatherings on the way in or out of church.

Seating in church in accordance with physical distancing requirements

- Seating arrangements in churches should conform with all national or regional official guidance related to physical distance and building capacity.
- The seating areas may need to be marked in a way to aid ‘distancing’.
- Families and individuals who live in the same household can sit together if they are living together.

Music: singing & instruments

- An organist or other musician, a small group of musicians, a cantor or a small choir, safely distanced is possible.
- Congregational singing is now permitted in most jurisdictions. The transmission of droplets is reduced if members of congregations sing softly and behind masks, and the Church of England’s guidance in England is that congregational singing requires the wearing of a mask.

General Liturgical Instructions and guidance

- Do continue to consider streaming services online where this is possible especially for the benefit of those who are afraid or reluctant to enter church buildings.
- Readers, preachers, leaders of intercessions etc., should continue to exercise caution in touching lecterns or pulpits.
- Instead of shaking hands with neighbours at the peace, a sign of reconciliation can be conveyed in a non-physical way with people staying in their places. This greeting should continue at a distance.
- Our continued guidance is that Holy Communion is distributed in the form of bread/wafer only. Both elements will be consecrated. The wine should not be distributed but consumed by the presiding priest only. It is a clear principle of Anglican theology that the sacrament of Holy Communion is present and complete in either of the consecrated elements. Please be aware that Church of England canons do not permit the use of individual communion cups and we as your bishops are not able to give permission for this, and we discourage the practice of intinction. However, your attention is drawn to our note on re-introduction of the Common Cup in Annexe.
- For the time being, it is preferable that only the presiding minister handles the vessels and administers Holy Communion. Given that it will still usually be in one kind for now, and in most places for not more than 50 persons, it is much easier to control hygiene if this is one person's responsibility.
- There should be no offertory procession with the elements.
- Priests presiding at the Eucharist should wash their hands in soap and water, or with an alcohol-based sanitizer, just prior to commencing the liturgy of the Sacrament.
- The words of distribution of the consecrated bread should be pronounced by the priest to the whole assembly corporately, so that the actual distribution of communion happens in silence.
- Hygiene rules prior to the administration of communion to the people need to be adhered to, by hand washing in soap and water, or using alcohol-based sanitiser. The bread should only be administered into the hand with care being taken not to touch communicants' hands.
- The bread/wafer is safest distributed with communicants approaching in a single line standing with a sensible distance between them. Church wardens will need to make appropriate and feasible arrangements for this.
- Where masks are worn, each communicant should extend their hands to receive Holy Communion, with face covering in place. They should then lower or unloop the face covering, consume the consecrated bread and then replace the face covering before moving back to their place in the congregation.
- Holy Water stoups remain discontinued.

Offerings/Collections

We continue to encourage people to give online and via standing orders and direct debits. The normal passing of the plate is not possible. Collections in church should be conducted using a tray at the exit. Those who count the collection at the end of the service

should wash their hands before and after doing the counting. This is a good time to investigate acquiring equipment to enable ‘contactless giving’.

Baptisms and Weddings

- Where possible and affordable, clergy are encouraged to test regularly and particularly ahead of Occasional Offices.
- The celebration of Holy Baptism requires special precautions. We continue to advise that only one candidate should be baptized at a given service. The font should be emptied and disinfected before any subsequent baptism service. The presiding priest should wear a mask. Water should be poured over the head of the candidate, using a shell or other such vessel. Infants should be held by the parents or godparents.

Sunday school and other gatherings

- Sunday School and junior church gatherings must adhere to the current national norms for gatherings of children in schools and day care centres.

After Service Gatherings

- The minister should consider whether remaining to meet and greet people following the service would risk compromising social distancing norms, and if so, should withdraw from the congregation after worship.
- Any gathering of the congregation for refreshments and/or conversation must be able to be compliant with national or local regulations. It is preferable that any gathering is outdoors, in private space and in small groups. Whilst recognising the good desire for sociability, it should also be recognised that informal social gatherings provide particularly high likelihoods of close contact and transmission of aerosols.

Cleaning – arrangements and briefing/training

- We emphasise that scrupulous cleaning of churches will need to be arranged. Cleaners should be carefully briefed/trained, supplied with proper gloves and disinfectants and (if working more than singly) equipped with masks.
- Particular attention should be given to cleaning vessels used in the service.
- In some chaplaincies, depending on location, it may be appropriate to air the building by opening a window(s) ahead of the service.

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Annexe: A Note on the Common Cup

The sharing of bread and wine at holy communion has been the norm in the Church of England since the Reformation. Withdrawal of the common cup has only been recommended in exceptional circumstances where public health is at risk. In the current circumstances, many members of congregations remain concerned about the health risks associated with a common cup. On the other hand, there are those for whom the withdrawal of the common cup has been a spiritual sacrifice which has become intolerably hard to bear.

Having considered the matter carefully, and taking medical advice, the Bishop's senior staff have decided that we should amend our Guidance to allow for re-introduction of the common cup in specific and controlled circumstances, as follows.

- 1. We expect that at the present time most chaplaincies and congregations will continue to administer holy communion in one kind only, and this is the generally followed practice in the Church of England currently.**
2. A request to re-introduce the common cup must be made formally to one of the bishops.
3. The bishops will consider such requests carefully and seriously. Requests will need to be accompanied by the following, including:
 - a. Evidence of a thorough discussion by a chaplaincy council, including by supplying a copy of the relevant minute.
 - b. Reassurance that this decision has widespread support and is uncontroversial in the local congregation.
 - c. Explanation of how the administration of the cup will be arranged physically, and in particular regarding how those who, for whatever reason, do not wish to receive the cup can be honoured, and will not feel moral or social pressure to receive.
 - d. Assurance that a silver chalice and fortified wine will be used, and that the chalice will be carefully wiped between each recipient.
 - e. Assurance that each recipient will be asked to use hand sanitiser before handling the chalice.
 - f. Agreement to review the arrangements (possibly with the chaplaincy council) after several weeks, informed by the experience of resuming use of the common cup.