



Guidance for Churches – January 2022

Introduction

Following the announcement by HM Government on 19th January that the measures put in place to mitigate against covid virus transmission as “Plan B” will be lifted in full on 27th January, the following guidance is offered to the dioceses of England and Wales. The material in this briefing has been agreed with Public Health officials and follows the regulations for England and concur with the regulations in place for Wales which take effect on 28th January 2022 (apart from the note regarding face coverings below).

Acts of Worship

The main mitigation against serious health issues arising from covid infection is to be fully vaccinated; this means two doses plus a booster for anyone aged 16 or over. The vaccine programme in England and Wales has had a major impact in reducing death and serious illness from infection with Covid-19. The Church in England and Wales supports the vaccination programme and encourages people to be vaccinated.

The scientific consensus is that society is moving towards the stage where the virus is transitioning from the pandemic phase to the endemic phase, but as stated by HM Government, there is still a risk associated with gathering for sustained periods in enclosed spaces and therefore there needs to be continued caution by all against infection.

This, however, has to be balanced against the need to move forward safely towards a normal lifestyle and these two positions will always be held in tension. This holding in tension is the key to living safely with Covid-19, namely keeping infections from a virus that cannot be eliminated to levels which minimise disruption to people's lives.

This guidance has been written with this principle in mind.

Alongside the positive effects of covid vaccination, it should be stressed that any people displaying symptoms of Covid-19 should stay at home and not participate in acts of worship in church. This is good practice for any transmissible illness. Medical advice should be sought as appropriate for those who are ill.

The main form of virus transmission is via personal oral or nasal aerosol. Those attending an act of worship may continue to wear a face covering (both nose and mouth) whilst in the church building (NB face coverings remain mandatory in Wales until further advised). There is no need for formal social distancing in church buildings, although those present should be sensitive to the needs of others around them. Churches should continue to ensure there is good ventilation, balancing this against the need for church heating, especially at this time.

It is clear from scientific evidence that transmission from surfaces (touch transmission) is now minimal and so the use of hymn books, missals and other worship aids can be resumed with immediate effect. Whilst it is still good practice to sanitise hands on entry and exit of churches, there is no need for readers (or other ministers) to sanitise their hands before reading or performing other

ministries in the church. All ministers of Holy Communion (clergy and lay people) should still sanitise their hands for the distribution of Holy Communion. Holy water stoups may be refilled but care should be seen that the water is changed regularly (at a minimum of once a week). Usual forms of church cleaning are sufficient.

Regarding the liturgical action, there should be a return to the normal mode of celebrating Mass respecting the integrity of the Rite. This would include the reintroduction of the Prayer of the Faithful (where this has not been reinstated already), the *Sign of Peace* may be offered again if felt appropriate, and Holy Communion should be distributed at the usual place and in the usual mode (i.e. with the faithful approaching the minister in an orderly procession). For the time being, Holy Communion must continue to be given under one kind only (the Sacred Host) and for concelebrations of clergy, intinction of the Precious Blood with the Sacred Host should continue to be used.

Where there is physical touch as part of another Rite of the Church (for example, anointing of the sick, ashing of foreheads etc) the use of cotton buds is no longer mandated, but the hands should be cleaned well before and after the Rite.

Congregational singing may continue and there is a general encouragement to wear face coverings while singing. However, it is recognised that not everyone will feel able to do this.

Social Activities

Parish social activities can resume (if they have been suspended) from the revert date to Plan A. It is recommended that the normal Health and Safety risk assessment for the activity and the space used for the activity is reviewed for these types of gatherings.

Home Visits

Home visits can continue (or begin again if they had been suspended) by priests, deacons and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion and other volunteers. The minister to the sick or housebound person should take care to ensure that the number of visits to different homes in a single session of visiting is managed. It is recommended (outside hospital and hospice chaplaincies and social care institutions who have infection control in place) that the number of people visited is assessed beforehand to prevent the possibilities of transmitting the virus between people. Assessing the time spent with people and ensuring that there is good ventilation and cleanliness during the visit are also good practice.

Conclusion

Whilst this reduction of restrictions brings about a more normal way of living, the Covid-19 virus is still in circulation, and this should be in the mind of those participating in the life of the Church as time goes forward holding in balance the need for personal safety and taking responsibility for that safety.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas

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24th January 2022

Updated 28th January 2022