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Frequently Asked Questions for Scottish Episcopal Churches in Scottish Government Phase 3

The following questions and answers amplify and give examples of what is permissible in Phase 3 of the Scottish Government lockdown easing. This is a complex phase for all of Scottish society and for us as churches and there will inevitably be areas that are subjective and require local contexts to be judged. For more detailed queries please contact your Diocesan Bishop/office.

Churches Re-opening for Congregational Worship after 15th July 2020.

Q: When will SEC churches re-open?

A: Church CAN open from 15th July but do not HAVE TO. Each vestry will judge when to open, based on the nature of the building, the usual size of congregation, the age and health of the clergy and congregation and many other factors. Some churches may open immediately, some may not open until Phase 4 of lockdown easing. There is no pressure for churches to open sooner than they wish.

Q: Does a church need the consent of a bishop to re-open?

A: Yes. The Bishop has oversight and care of all the congregations in the Diocese and will exercise this oversight and care by approving applications for re-opening for church activities.

Q: Do we have to have communion/eucharistic services if we re-open?

A: No. There is the usual discretion on the part of the Rector and vestry to offer non-eucharistic worship (e.g. morning prayer, Service of the Word, non-liturgical worship etc.). Canon 22.6 requires eucharistic worship on Sundays (“when in the opinion of the Bishop it is reasonably practicable”): coming out of a pandemic you can assume that your bishop will be open to your sensible and pragmatic approach as to what is appropriate.

Q: Not all the ‘usual’ congregation can fit in our church with physical distancing and/or the cap of 50: should we wait to re-open until all can attend?

A: This is a pastoral decision: churches may choose to offer a mix of online and in-person worship, or managed system of booking spaces or more than one service per Sunday. There are many options: discuss with the bishop.

Q: Why are 50 allowed for worship but only 20 at weddings and funerals?

A: The Scottish Government have made decisions about the exceptions that can be made to strict ongoing lockdown and have judged the risks associated with these. Their judgement, to avoid large gatherings but allow spiritual comfort to be found, is that those numbers are appropriate for those types of service during this part of Phase 3.

Q: Can people who are ‘vulnerable’ (including those who are over 70) come to church or carry out duties associated with a return to worship in Phase 3?

A: Anyone who is shielding should follow Scottish Government guidance and should not presently attend church in any capacity. For others (including the over 70s) the official NHS advice remains to stay at home as much as possible and when you do go out to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside your household. That advice has to be taken into account as people judge what activities they are confident to undertake.

Q: Why can't we sing in church?

A: There may be an increased risk of generating infectious aerosol droplets while singing. The Scottish Government guidance issued for Phase 3 says:

“...scientific and medical advice around the transmission risk of activities such as singing, chanting, shouting and the playing of wind or other instruments that require breath to operate is still being developed. This activity should be avoided both in congregational worship and in rehearsal.

“...where essential to an act of worship, a single individual may sing or chant behind a Plexi-glass screen. Any screen used should be cleaned regularly.”

Q: I usually give my neighbour (not in my household) a lift to church: can I do that?

A: No. That is not permitted under Phase 3 guidelines.

Q: Do we have to wear face coverings in church services?

A: You are not mandated by Government Guidance to wear a face covering as a member of the congregation, although you may choose to. The Government Guidance for places of worship is:

“In enclosed spaces, where physical distancing is more difficult and where there is a risk of close contact with multiple people who are not members of your household, you should wear a face covering.

“This will be particularly important where interactions within a 2 metre distance are essential for faith-specific requirements, although these interactions should be avoided.

“The wearing of face coverings must not be used as an alternative to other precautions including physical distancing, hand washing and respiratory hygiene.”

The SEC guidance, developed from the above, suggests face coverings will be worn e.g. by welcomers and the priest at the distribution of communion as these are contexts where interactions in less than 2m may or will occur.

Some churches might judge that due to local physical constraints or size, face coverings should be worn during the service or as the congregation arrives and departs. This remains a local decision based on the context.

Q: May I bring my children to church?

A: Yes. It may be worthwhile speaking to the Rector beforehand as to whether separate arrangements are being made for Sunday School or similar. The public health guidance is that children aged 11 or under no longer need to physically distance indoors. Young people aged 12-17 must continue to physically distance. All children and adults would be counted together with regard to the 50 (or fewer) maximum number attending. There will be no shared toys or books available so you might want to bring your child's own toys.

Q: In Phase 3 can a service leader take a service in more than one church (or multiple services in the same church) on the same Sunday?

A: Yes: There would not appear to be any restriction on being able to taking multiple services in church(es) on the same Sunday in Phase 3 as long as distancing and hygiene standards are maintained. If multiple services are to take place in the same building, a practical consideration will be the need to clean the building between services. The Advisory Group's Phase 3 Guidance includes information about cleaning.

Q: Can we receive the consecrated wine as well as the consecrated bread?

A: The Bishops' guidance remains to only receive in one kind, i.e. the bread. The College of Bishops is well aware of the breadth of theological and ecclesiological views that a broad church like the SEC holds and differing views on what might constitute 'full communion'. The debates on this are well worth exploring as a church, but as we emerge from a pandemic our priority must be to minimise the risk of virus transmission. The Government Guidance on this says:

“the consumption of food and drink is avoided where it is not essential to the act of worship. Where it is essential to the act of worship, the use of communal vessels is avoided”

The simplest, safest (if maybe unsatisfactory for some) way of sharing Holy Communion/the Eucharist is to just share the bread as the essential element of this ritual. The addition of wine by any means: individual cups, intincted drops on wafers etc. all add extra levels of complexity, and hence risk, in the safe management of distribution of elements.

For a church where this is a major issue, the answer may be to delay the resumption of eucharistic worship until such time as the Government Guidance is further relaxed.

Q: What are rules on using the toilets in church for a service?

A: The guidance in the Phase 3 Advisory Group paper should be followed, but the Government have produced guidance at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-public-and-customer-toilets-guidance/>

Pastoral Visiting & Housegroups – activities in private homes

Q: How many pastoral visits per day can we make when in Phase 3.

A: From the 10th July the Government Guidance on meeting others (which applies in this case) says you can meet with up to four households in total each day, indoors and outdoors.

Q: Can someone meet with a cleric in the Rectory or the church?

A: Yes, under the Government Guidance on meeting others indoors. The same principles apply to any meeting in church or a private home.

Q: Can housegroups or other small church meetings now take place?

A: Again, applying the Government Guidance on meeting others means that indoor meetings are now permitted, but only with members of three households able to be together indoors with physical distancing and subject to an overall maximum of 8 people. If a housegroup or small group falls within this definition (or is willing to limit attendance to the same limit), then it could go ahead and start meeting.

Other Activities in Churches & Church Premises

Q: Can physically distanced vestry meetings take place in church buildings?

A: Probably not: under the Government Guidance for meeting others, meetings are permitted, but only with members of three households able to be together indoors and subject to an overall maximum of 8 people. This would exclude most vestries (which are made of more households) from being able to meet at this stage of Phase 3. The rules on physically distanced numbers in church for worship do not apply to meetings or other non-worship activities.

Q. Can non-SEC hall/church tenants/users restart their activities in SEC church buildings or halls?

A: User groups/tenants who are permitted to restart under Scottish Government guidelines (e.g. nurseries preparing to start work) may resume their activities with physical distancing and hygiene measures in place. A clear agreement must be made between the vestry and the tenant/user over who will manage hygiene/contacts etc. around the specific activities.

Q. Can other denominations/faiths start worship in an SEC church building?

A. Yes: if the vestry ensure that they follow their own parent charity's guidance and get clear agreement on who will do cleaning/contacts etc.

Q: Can a worship team/group meet in church to rehearse and record worship?

A: Yes, members of three households are able to be together indoors, subject to an overall maximum of 8 people, with physical distancing and hygiene measures, to rehearse or record worship.

Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals, Ordinations etc.

Q: Can weddings and funerals happen and take place indoors?

A: Yes, with a cap on total numbers of 20 people attending (indoors or outdoors). The same constraints on physical distancing and hygiene also apply. Specific guidance is given on this in the Pastoral Guidelines.

Q: Can baptisms take place?

A: Yes: in the context of a church service, with the appropriate limits on numbers and with distancing and hygiene. The Government Guidance states:

“where rituals or ceremonies require water to be applied to the body, full immersion is avoided and only small volumes are splashed onto the body. Where an infant is involved a parent/guardian should hold the infant. Strict hand hygiene should be maintained throughout.”

There is specific guidance on hand hygiene for e.g. anointing candidates in the Bishops’ Pastoral Guidance for Phase 3.

Q: Can ordinations take place?

A: Again, yes: in the context of a church service, with the appropriate limits on numbers and with distancing and hygiene. The same specific guidance applies for e.g. anointing and laying hands on candidates. Theologically and canonically, the bishop is required to lay on hands for ordination. For priests, it will not be possible for all the priests present to lay on hands.