

Dear Clergy, Lay Readers, Vestry Secretaries and Diocesan Secretaries

The Advisory Group of the Scottish Episcopal Church met yesterday to consider the First Minister's statement to the Scottish Parliament earlier this week, when she confirmed that public worship could resume from 26 March 2021, subject to various conditions.

The Government's guidance on Places of Worship has not so far been updated with any supplementary information regarding the resumption of public worship. It is to be updated by 26 March, but the Advisory Group's expectation is that the changes will be minimal and not add much to what the First Minister has already said.

The First Minister's announcement is welcome, but should not be taken to mean that worship can resume in the form to which we were accustomed a year ago, before the commencement of the pandemic.

Owing to the fact that no further Government guidance has been forthcoming at this stage, the Advisory Group is not issuing revised versions of its previous substantial advice documents. It will review those documents once further Government guidance is available. However, in the meantime, it draws the following to the attention of clergy, lay readers and local churches:

1. The Government has not announced that we are, at this stage, returning to level 4 in the Strategic Framework. Consequently, the permission to resume public worship should be regarded as a specific exception to the continuing national lockdown.
2. While the ability to reopen our churches is good news, the Advisory Group reiterates the previous advice of the College of Bishops that no church should feel obliged to reopen at this stage, nor members of clergy or lay readers feel obliged to take services unless they are comfortable to do so, and whether or not they have been vaccinated.
3. Where a church has not previously reopened since the commencement of the pandemic last year, the consent of the Bishop is needed before any reopening, following submission of a plan for reopening being submitted to the Bishop (see pro forma plan dated 24/9/20 available at: <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/coronavirus-updates/>). Where a church did previously reopen during 2020, there is no need to reapply to the Bishop for further consent, unless the intention is to operate differently from the plan previously submitted to the Bishop. However, the Bishop should nevertheless be informed that the church is reopening.
4. Where churches have been closed during the current lockdown, the Advisory Group advice regarding the preliminary matters to be addressed locally prior to the resumption of any public worship set out in section C of the Group's previous guidance remains relevant: <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/Revised-Phase-3-Guidance-Version-7-20.11.20.pdf>
5. From 26 March, the maximum number permitted to attend public worship is 50 (this number includes children). The previous 2m distancing requirement remains applicable. Consequently, if, in order to observe that 2m requirement, the capacity of the building is reduced below 50, then that lower number is the permitted maximum.
6. All of the previous limitations which applied when churches were previously allowed to reopen will similarly apply from 26 March. In addition to social distancing, that includes the requirement to wear face coverings, ensuring hand sanitising, the maintaining of a register of contact details of those attending services etc – essentially the general requirements set out in the Advisory Group guidance referred to above.

7. The previous restrictions on singing similarly apply, namely that congregational singing is not permitted but that in an act of worship, a single individual may sing or chant behind a plexiglass screen.

8. Particularly given that the date for reopening will enable services to take place during Holy Week, it may be that some churches will wish to hold a number of services within a relatively short space of time. In principle, multiple services are a possibility but the areas of a church building to which those attending services have access will require to be cleaned and disinfected before the building is next used.

9. The announcement by the Government this week does not envisage the possibility of outdoor services. These are subject to the Government "events" guidance and are possible only once the overall situation returns to levels 0 or 1 in the Strategic Framework.

10. There is no information available at this stage as to whether or not it is permissible to cross a local authority boundary to attend a place of worship. Clergy or lay readers leading services may do so under the general exception for "work" but, apart from that, it appears that, in the absence of any announcement to the contrary, boundary crossing is not currently permissible.

11. The maximum number permissible to attend funerals remains at 20, and for weddings at 5 (or 6 where an interpreter is required).

Kind regards

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