

Dear Clergy, Lay Readers, Vestry Secretaries and Diocesan Secretaries

The Advisory Group welcomes the First Minister's recent confirmation that most remaining Covid-related legal restrictions are to be lifted on 21 March. The legal requirement to wear face masks in various indoor locations, including Places of Worship, is to remain in place and will be reviewed again in a couple of weeks. However, the lifting of most of the restrictions from next week indicates confidence on the Government's part that, given the extent of vaccination take-up, the imposition of legal restrictions is no longer proportionate to the level of perceived risk, notwithstanding the relatively high level of cases at present. This change, and the removal of the requirement to wear face coverings (when that change is finally lifted), should provide a welcome opportunity for a fuller resumption of pre-pandemic church life. However, each congregation will need to consider carefully how it navigates the journey from its current arrangements to a less constrained future.

Changes from 21 March

From 21 March the legal regulations requiring those responsible for places of worship to take measures to minimise the spread of the virus on their premises will cease and are expected to be replaced with general guidance. At the present time the Government's Place of Worship guidance remains in place but has been reduced in scope: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-places-of-worship/>.

The Advisory Group considers that in the light of these changes it is now for each church to make its own decisions following its own assessment of risks taking account of its own circumstances, the make up of its congregation, the arrangements for communal worship it has adopted during the various phases of restriction over the last two years and a pastoral assessment of views locally.

Clergy and vestries will want to consider not only what pandemic-related measures they wish to phase out but also the period of time over which such changes might be made. The Group recommends a continuing emphasis on hand hygiene (including the availability of facilities for sanitising), adequate ventilation and regular cleaning. There may be a need to give reassurance as changes are introduced and to take account of the preferences of congregation members who are less ready to move at pace to resume pre-pandemic church life. For instance, some may prefer to continue to worship online, some may wish to continue to maintain a degree of social distancing while entering and leaving church and during worship. Once the requirement to wear face coverings is finally lifted, some may still wish to continue wearing them. While lateral flow tests remain available free of charge, the Group suggests that twice weekly testing should be undertaken (with one being shortly before attending church services or events). However, from the Easter weekend, 18 April, the Government is dropping its general advice to undertake twice weekly testing. For the period to the end of April, the Government advises that those visiting a care home or hospital should taking a lateral flow test beforehand. The Group also continues to encourage church members to receive the vaccination and booster, if they have not already done so.

Common Cup

In the light of the changing environment, the College of Bishops is also discontinuing its suspension of the Common Cup. The Advisory Group recognises that the possibility of resuming the Common Cup is a significant step and church members should not feel obliged to receive. It remains acceptable to receive in one kind only. If a church wished to re-introduce the Common Cup but felt there might be significant anxiety, there are options that could be adopted, such as making it very clear that communion in one kind is still acceptable or even that those administering it could wipe the chalice with a 70% alcohol-based disinfectant wipe instead of a purificator. This may provide an added degree

of protection as well as reassurance to those receiving the Cup. The wipe should not contaminate the taste of the wine. Alcohol-based wipes are available from a variety of sources, such as: https://www.medisupplies.co.uk/Wipes/Disinfectant-Wipes/Medipal-Alcohol-Wipes?utm_source=google&utm_medium=product_feed_or_listings&pl=STD&ccv=Y&gclid=EAlaIQo bChMluozjlq6l9glVj9PtCh2ZMw5nEAQYASABEgJL4fD_BwE

Maundy Thursday

Clergy may be wondering about whether to resume foot washing on Maundy Thursday. The Advisory Group suggests that that similarly be a local decision, in the light of the general pace of change considered appropriate for each congregation.

Future guidance

The Scottish Government's Strategic Framework Update of 22 February, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-scotlands-strategic-framework-update-february-2022/>, while envisaging a sustainable return to a much more normal way of life, acknowledges that the threat of new variants that are potentially more harmful remains and gives indications of mitigating measures including the imposition of restrictions that might be considered in different circumstances. In the event of the reimposition of restrictions, the Advisory Group will be ready to resume its work in support of congregations where necessary. For the present, with the emphasis on decision-making on future practice in congregations being taken locally in the light of local circumstances and following local risk assessment the Advisory Group is archiving its former guidance on the provincial website. The Group encourages congregations who feel the need for support as they develop plans for a return to more normal church life to engage with their Diocesan Office or Bishop. While the Advisory Group sees a diminishing role for itself, if the assumed progress to greater normality is maintained, it will continue to monitor developments and where appropriate and likely to be helpful will add to and update the FAQs on the provincial website. In the meantime, the most recent guidance document issued by the Advisory Group in November 2021 will remain on the provincial website but only as an archive resource rather than as a working document.

Kind regards

Donald Walker
Director of Communications
Scottish Episcopal Church
07736 042 850