

## **Coronavirus Places of Worship Task Force Meeting**

### **Full text of email from Bishop Alan**

Here is a brief update from yesterday's **Coronavirus Places of Worship Task Force meeting**. The Catholic Church was represented by Cardinal Nichols and Professor Jim McManus along with Canon Chris Thomas. The highlights of the discussion are as follows:

### **The safety and opening of churches**

1. Health professional research to date indicates that the new virus variant is as well controlled by social distancing and mitigations as the old. Further studies are taking place for a more concrete verification on this matter.
2. HM Government stressed that there would be no blanket closure of places of worship. They asked that each Place of Worship should re-evaluate their own local situation and examine all factors that could affect the good covid security demonstrated by places of worship so far. This is to include (but is not limited to):
  - a. Sufficient stewarding and management of the venue
  - b. Sufficient cleaning after acts of communal worship
  - c. Maintaining good social distancing in the space available along with good ventilation
  - d. Factors affecting travel to and from the place of worship, such as public transport
  - e. The length of exposure time for an act of worship is critical and should be minimised – anything that is not necessary should be omitted.
  - f. Those who have gathered for worship should not mingle before or after the service outside of the church. They should disperse immediately.
  - g. All non-essential worship should be postponed or cancelled (see below)
3. The officials noted that keeping covid secure places of worship open for public worship adds no extra burden to the NHS and provides recognised benefits for the community.
4. The task force expressed with great clarity that the role of the Local Authority is one of enforcement of closure in particular circumstances on the basis of evidence of lack of COVID security.
5. Public Health England will conduct an exercise in mapping exposure risks from different venues across the country for better data.

### **Vaccines and their roll-out in the Community**

1. All faith communities were asked to encourage and support the roll-out of the vaccines.
2. There should be explicit encouragement of community members to take up the offer of vaccines whenever it is offered to an individual. Evidence across the country is showing that there is "vaccination hesitancy" amongst certain groups of people, in particular the BAME community, because of misinformation on social media. There was strong encouragement from HMG to counteract this strongly.
3. In our case, the fact that Pope Francis will be vaccinated next week should be stressed along with his own personal endorsement for vaccination. See <https://www.rt.com/news/512030-pope-francis-covid19-vaccine/>
4. There was a request for volunteer support in areas with vaccination hubs/centres and this should be done through the local health commissioning groups. There are lots of different roles that are necessary such as stewarding, as well as a request for former healthcare workers to assist in the inoculation programme.
5. HMG published the Vaccination roll-out plan today. It is found here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/951284/UK\\_COVID-19\\_vaccines\\_delivery\\_plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951284/UK_COVID-19_vaccines_delivery_plan.pdf)
6. We raised the issue of vaccination for hospital chaplains and care home chaplains, as well as clergy in general, and this will be followed up by email.

### **Updated Guidance for Places of Worship**

The MHCLG has updated the Places of Worship Guidance on 11<sup>th</sup> January which can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-2-december>

The general approach of the guidance is an extension of the previous rules in place under Tier 4 in December. However, it has been amended to reflect the new national restrictions. These restrictions:

- require people to stay at home, except for specific purposes;
- prevent people gathering with those they do not live with, except for specific purposes; and,
- close certain businesses.

**Attending a place of worship is one of the very few legal exemptions that allow larger numbers to gather in the same venue.** To keep everyone safe, where places of worship choose to open it is crucial that those attending comply with the law and COVID-19 Secure guidance.

The following activities are regarded as activities that should not take place at the present time in a Place of Worship:

1. Baptisms or other ceremonies which mark significant life cycle moments but which do not take place as an established part of normal communal worship (with the exception of commemorative events that celebrate the life of a person who has died – see the detailed guidance on this in the full document).
2. Prayer or study groups in person.
3. Lifestyle and leisure/recreational groups such as craft groups or exercise groups.
4. Amateur choir practice or group bell ringing.
5. Tourism and shops contained within the place of worship.

In addition to this summary, there are other key changes:

1. A Revised wording on weddings to highlight the consideration that is required from those participating about whether the circumstance is exceptional in order to proceed at this time.
2. Strongly suggesting that singing should only take place where it is essential to the act of worship, and should be restricted to professional performance or those leading the act of worship.

## **Singing, chanting and the use of musical instruments**

COVID-19 spreads from person to person through small droplets, aerosols and through direct contact. Singing, playing some musical instruments, shouting and physical activity increases the risk of transmission through small droplets and aerosols. Existing risks increased by new variants of the virus, mean that additional safeguards should be put in place to minimise opportunities for the virus to spread:

1. Where singing or chanting is essential to an act of worship, this should be limited to one person wherever possible. Exceptionally, where it is essential to the service, up to three individuals should be permitted to do so. Strict social distancing should be observed and the use of Plexi-glass screens should be considered to protect worshippers, and each other.
2. Communal singing should not take place. This applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are used.
3. Chanting, shouting and/or playing of instruments that are blown into should also be avoided in communal worship and in rehearsals.
4. Where communal singing plays a big part in worship, and recordings are available, we suggest you use these as an alternative to live singing. If a place of worship hosts a professional group, for rehearsing or worship, you should follow the performing arts guidance.
5. Avoid playing recorded music at a volume that may result in people using raised voices or shouting to communicate when arriving or leaving for worship.
6. Spoken responses during worship should not be in a raised voice.
7. Good ventilation plays a crucial role in reducing transmission. Do what you can to improve ventilation whenever possible.

I hope you find these notes useful. Thanks to the wonderful work done in parishes by our stewards and other helpers our churches are amongst the safest of public spaces. Nevertheless it is essential that good covid security is maintained- "Any church that cannot open safely, with all the necessary covid measures in place, should not do so".

With all good wishes and an assurance of continued prayers,

+Alan Williams, sm