

Wednesday 16th February, 2022

To all ministers and Circuit Stewards serving in Northern Ireland,

I am writing in light of the Minister of Health's announcement earlier this week that the legislation governing Covid mitigations has been moved from law to guidance. In what is laid out below we are seeking to develop the balance between welcome freedom and the responsibility as citizens and particularly as Christians to keep others safe. In the weeks which lie ahead we continue to have the responsibility of being good neighbours.

Having consulted with your Leaders you can move ahead with these changes straight away. However, don't feel pressure. Some of you are on leave this week, others are covering for colleagues who are ill, so if your local circumstances mean that it is better to wait for a week or two that is fine. We would ask however that changes are in place by 1st March.

We will review these changes at the end of March or before that if Government guidance changes.

1. **General Ongoing Mitigations:**

- Please continue to pay attention to the basic mitigations, these include providing hand sanitiser, hand washing and making sure that Church buildings and halls are well ventilated.
- At all times government advice should continue to be followed with regard to self-isolation related to Covid-19. Further, those who have (or think they might have) any of the symptoms of Covid-19, or are just generally feeling unwell, should be encouraged not to attend services, meetings or activities.
- We continue to ask ministers and lay workers to do a Lateral Flow Test regularly, and especially on days when they are leading worship or doing pastoral visiting.

2. It is no longer a requirement to keep a record of attendance at services.

3. **Face Coverings:**

- Face coverings may be removed when members of the congregation are in a seat or pew, at either a service of worship, bible study, prayer meeting or business meeting, **apart from when singing, when face coverings must continue to be worn** (unless exempted). Everyone aged 13 and over, apart from those exempted, must continue to wear face coverings on entry and exit and when moving around.
- Those leading from the front do not have to wear face coverings when leading, including those leading singing, but we recommend a minimum of 2 metres from the front row of the congregation.

4. **Social distancing:**

- While social distancing is no longer a legal requirement at Church services, it is still advised. We recommend 1 metre as a guide but Church Councils can decide what they want to do. If social distancing is being reduced or removed we recommend keeping an area of seating where 1 or 2 metre social distancing can be maintained.
- Where possible we recommend 1 metre social distancing at church meetings, bible studies etc where capacity is not an issue.

5. **Catering etc**

There is now no restriction on either formal or informal catering on church premises. However, it is recommended that sensible mitigations and measures should be in place to reduce the potential spread of Covid-19.

6. **Home Groups** and other church meetings may take place in private homes, with sensible social distancing and good ventilation as appropriate.

7. **Pastoral Visiting** in private homes may move towards a more normal pattern of in-person visitation, though we recommend ringing ahead to arrange a visit and checking everything is ok for a visit to take place e.g. no-one self-isolating.

8. **Baptisms and Holy Communion:** Please continue to operate under previous guidance. We will review these areas in particular in March.

9. **Children's and Youth Ministry:** Activities for young people and children have been vitally important throughout the Pandemic. IMYC continue to be available to support and guide as activities pick up momentum. Last Summer IMYC prepared a document called 'Next Steps' which you can find here <https://irishmethodist.org/s/next-steps-resource-IMYC.pdf>. While the introduction needs updated it contains pertinent questions which may be of help to your youth and children's leaders as they start up activities again.

10. **Risk Assessments** continue to be good practice even beyond Covid for all elements of church life and should be continued.

As always, your DS will guide you if you have questions.

We continue to pray with and for each other as we navigate this new season.

Every blessing,

Heather

On behalf of the CMT

(The President, the Lay Leader and the District Superintendents)

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