

Tuesday 27th July 2021

***To all ministers and Circuit Stewards in Northern Ireland***

This letter comes to update you on Face Coverings and Vaccinations.

**Face Coverings**

You may have heard on the news yesterday that the Northern Ireland Executive has moved the requirement to wear face-coverings during acts of worship from a legal requirement to Guidance. I am writing to inform you that the policy of the Methodist Church in Ireland continues to be that face coverings are worn at services of worship, therefore those attending Methodist Churches are asked to continue to wear face coverings during acts of worship.

Similar guidance is being given by the Church of Ireland and Presbyterian Churches.

The CMT came to this decision for a number of reasons, these include:

Our duty to protect each other: If face-coverings are not worn and there is a case of Covid, there is an increased risk of the PHA requiring the whole congregation to self-isolate.

The clear and strong guidance from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor that face coverings should be worn.

A recognition that singing is a vital part of worship. We know that singing increases risk of the spread of the virus, wearing a face-covering is a necessary mitigation against that risk.

Our desire to protect those who are vulnerable and model responsible behaviour.

The NI Executive has stated that "Any measures not outlined in these relaxations, such as the requirement for face coverings in other settings,....will be considered in more detail at our meeting on 12th August". Please remember therefore that, as previously advised, the wearing of face coverings continues to be required in law

- when entering and leaving the building
- at 'non-worship' indoor meetings which are publicly accessible, like Bible Studies
- at weddings, except for the 'officiant' and the bride and groom. There is an obvious legal inconsistency here as currently face coverings are legally required at weddings but not at church services. We have pointed this out to The Executive Office and will update as soon as we receive any news.

The exceptions are that face coverings may be removed when all are seated at 'business' meetings, which are not open to all, and when food and drink are being consumed.



## Vaccinations

The CMO asked us to make an appeal to our congregations, and particularly young people, to avail of the opportunity to be vaccinated. This appeal is in accordance with our stated policy of encouraging vaccination. (you can find our statement here <https://irishmethodist.org/news/roll-up-your-sleeves>).

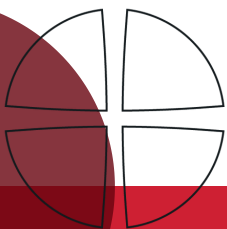
Ministers too are strongly encouraged to be vaccinated. If this raises any issues for you, you must speak with your District Superintendent.

Navigating this, often confusing, period of the easing of restrictions is in many ways more challenging than previous periods when restrictions were being enhanced. There is no doubt that we, and those in our congregations, will have different opinions as to what should happen when. We all need to fulfil our responsibility for the safety of our members along with our desire to enable and encourage people to join in worship. As always we journey this together. Stephen is available to those on the North Eastern District as well as his own District, during Philip's sabbatical.

There is due to be an update on social distancing when the Executive meets on Thursday. We will be in touch if changes are announced then which affect our life and witness.

Warm regards,

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**UPDATE (Wednesday 28th July 2021)**

Further to yesterday's email I have received confirmation from the Executive Office that the moving of the requirement to wear face-coverings during acts of worship from a legal requirement to guidance applies to wedding services as well. This means that the same provisions which apply to Sunday services apply to weddings. Thus, while face coverings are not required by law when guests are seated at the service the Methodist Church in Ireland's policy continues to be that face coverings are worn at all services of worship, and those attending Methodist Churches are asked to continue to wear face coverings.

Until now the only exceptions at weddings have been the officiant and the bride and groom, in light of the change to the Regulations the whole bridal party (ie brides maids and best men etc) may now be exempt if they wish.

Warm regards

Heather

