

19th August 2020

To all ministers

“Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baka they make it a place of springs” Psalm 84:5-6

Dear all,

The significant announcements made by the Taoiseach last night along with what the Northern Irish Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor are saying about the possibility of increased restrictions indicate that we are, once again, in a phase of change with regard to the restrictions necessitated by Coronavirus.

It was in that context that my mind turned to Psalm 84, a psalm of pilgrimage. Having journeyed this far through Lockdown and with a long Autumn and Winter ahead there are times when the picture of a long pilgrimage isn't very appealing! But it seems to me that our calling in this season is to walk faithfully, step by step, in God's company. Like our brothers and sisters in faith so many centuries ago the invitation is to keep our focus on God and God's ways, and there will be times when we are joyful, times when we are weary. Step by step the Spirit of God invites us to keep going, and to journey so that our lives bring glory to Jesus.

Face Coverings

The major information which this email brings is with regard to the wearing of face-coverings at services of worship. Today, with the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church we are formally advising that face coverings be worn at church services. This comes into effect from Sunday 30th August.

The formal announcement is as follows:

1. At this time, both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, the governments have not formally made mandatory the wearing of face coverings at services of worship. This is, in part, due to the fact that as churches we are committed to maintaining 2 metre physical distancing between household groups and strict adherence to all government guidance on hand hygiene, cleaning, ventilation etc.
2. It however remains our responsibility to ensure that our services of worship are safe places for all who join with us. It has become increasingly clear that the wearing of face coverings, in conjunction with hand washing etc, is likely to reduce the spread of Coronavirus, thus helping to protect others. Their use is therefore one way in which we can evidence protection for the most vulnerable, support for our health workers and practical love for our neighbours.



The Methodist Church In Ireland

3. Following further recent consultations with public health authorities, the Methodist Church in Ireland joins with Christian church leaders all over this island in formally recommending and encouraging the use of face coverings at all services of worship, along with the ongoing maintenance of 2 metre physical distancing, from Sunday 30th August 2020, and earlier if practicable.
 - (a) We understand that some people are exempted from the wearing of face coverings, as outlined in the two jurisdictions:
<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings> and
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/aac74c-guidance-on-safe-use-of-face-coverings>
 - (b) We also recognise that whilst it may not be appropriate for those who are leading from the front during worship, including preaching, to wear face coverings, they should at all times continue to maintain at least 2 metre physical distancing from one another, and four metres physical distancing from the front row of the congregation.

To this, I want to add some guidance notes:

- (i) This formal recommendation applies to all church services, including funerals and weddings. With regard to weddings the immediate bridal party (ie bride, groom bridesmaids and best man and groomsmen) are exempt but, apart from the couple, who are a household, the bridal party must observe 2 m social distancing.
- (ii) Guidance will be issued with regard to the wearing of face -coverings at other meetings on church premises early next week.
- (iii) When making this guidance known please ask the congregation to bring their own face coverings. It would also be helpful if you had some available at the door for those who forget and for visitors.

Singing

Singing significantly increases the risk of the spread of Coronavirus, thus while it is permitted by the Governments, the Methodist Church in Ireland has not allowed it. We are learning from those churches who have resumed services in church buildings that the fact that we may not sing is a significant loss. The formal recommendation that face-coverings should be worn opens up the possibility of quiet singing. **Therefore, if it is the wish of Church Councils, those who are wearing face coverings may sing quietly i.e. at the level of quiet spoken voice.**

If your Church Council would like to introduce this, please speak with your District Superintendent first.

Republic of Ireland Guidance re meetings on Church Premises

The provisions re numbers permitted at church services remain the same. This applies except for Laois, Kildare and Offaly, where local lockdown provisions at the moment mean that churches should only open for private prayer.

The advice which we received this morning is that the provision of 50 applies to church services and to formal activities linked to the life of the church, e.g. Bible Studies, Church Councils, as long as all guidance with regard to social distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene, ventilation etc is strictly observed.

We are seeking advice about activities for children and young people and will update you as soon as possible.

Connexional Prayer Meeting

A reminder that a Connexional Prayer meeting will take place on Monday 24th August online at 8pm. Please continue to make this known to your congregations. You can register here: <https://bit.ly/ConnexionalPrayer>

As always, we will do our best to keep you up to date with the implications of government announcements for church life but please keep alert for announcements especially about local restrictions.

If you have any specific questions please speak with your District Superintendent. Stephen is on leave at the moment so those on his District can refer to Andrew (RoI), Philip (NI) or to me.

Yours

Heather

(on behalf of the President, the Lay Leader, the District Superintendents and the Director of Ministry)