

COVID UPDATE – 6 JANUARY 2021

TO ALL MINISTERS AND PRESBYTERY CLERKS

Dear Colleagues

This afternoon I have chaired a meeting of our own Covid-19 Group and subsequent to that I attended a meeting of faith representatives and Professor Jason Leitch, the National Clinical Director.

What follows comes from those meetings and I hope answers some of the issues which you have raised. Some of what is said below applies to all parishes in Scotland, some only to Level 4 areas (mainland Scotland and Skye) but there may be items that are of general interest in the Presbyteries of England and International Charges.

PUBLIC STATEMENTS BY THE CHURCH ON THE LOCKDOWN

You will have seen that some other denominations have issued statements to the media criticising the decision of the Scottish Government to close churches for worship and private prayer. Some have asked why the Church of Scotland has not also issued a statement.

There are two reasons.

One is that we as a Group see the sense of the Government's decision in the face of the growing threat of the new variant of the coronavirus and we believe our Church should be supportive of the very difficult choice that has been made. You should know that Prof Leitch has just stated in the meeting that as places of worship were the last settings to be closed, they will also be the first to be reopened when restrictions are eased.

The other reason is that we have consciously adopted an approach of building trusted relationships with the SG and its civil servants in which we are able to put across our concerns and they are able to share something of the reasoning behind the policies they have adopted. The "letter to the editor" approach can damage these relationships of trust and can make politicians more defensive and less willing to be open about the policy debate. In essence, we are better heard by Government in these weekly meetings than we would be by issuing press statements.

You should, however, know that when we are approached by the media we do offer comment and that happens on a daily basis. We say that we deeply regret that it has been necessary to close for worship but that we accept that the Government's decision had to be made. In the meantime, we continue to sustain our life through a variety of approaches and our premises remain open for essential services upon which the most vulnerable of our neighbours depend. And that we look forward to the day when we can meet in person.

The whole thrust of the lockdown is to stay at home – and only to leave home when it is essential to do so because it is when we are near other people that the virus has the chance to spread. Given the dangers of the moment and the promise of the vaccines the Covid Group believe that the absence of the already very restricted physical worship services is a price worth paying to keep people safe from an infection which, in its new form, is threatening to run out of control.

BAPTISMS IN ENHANCED LEVEL 4 AREAS

These are not permissible in the enhanced Level 4 areas.

FUNERALS IN CHURCH IN ENHANCED LEVEL 4 AREAS

This has not changed - there should be no more than twenty mourners at a service. The minister, funeral director, organist do not count in this number. Further details can be accessed [here](#).

FUNERAL VISITS IN ENHANCED LEVEL 4 AREAS

Unless the threshold for pastoral visiting is able to be met (providing emotional support to someone whose wellbeing is at risk, including those who are isolated) funeral visits should be carried out online or by phone. If a personal visit is to be made to someone's home only members of that household should be in attendance. Ministers, deacons and others leading funerals may also meet families in church buildings previously approved to open by Presbytery if it proves impossible to meet using technology.

PASTORAL VISITS IN ENHANCED LEVEL 4 AREAS

Scottish Government guidance says that it is permissible to go to someone's house to provide emotional support to someone whose wellbeing is at risk, including those who are isolated. Ministers, deacons and those undertaking pastoral care must make a judgement as to whether a personal visit is required as opposed to an online meeting or telephone call, bearing in mind this threshold. Where appropriate a minister, deacon or pastoral visitor may also meet an individual for pastoral care in a church building previously approved to be open by Presbytery or a manse subject to the threshold above being met and protocols on pastoral visiting in the Church guidance being followed.

ORDINATIONS IN ENHANCED LEVEL 4 AREAS

At present, these are not permissible in enhanced Level 4 areas but we continue to press the case with the Scottish Government.

USING CHURCH BUILDINGS FOR ESSENTIAL PURPOSES IN ENHANCED LEVEL 4 AREAS

As with early last year, the church building can still be used for essential support services and travelling to the building to provide these is an exception to the stay at home rule. In general, please make sure that you can justify the service as being essential and that the number of volunteers is the minimum required.

To give a Prof Leitch example. If you host a meeting of Narcotics Anonymous for six homeless people who cannot meet online then it is OK to continue – with all the usual mitigations of masks, open

windows etc. And that can be widened to foodbanks, regulated childcare that allows key workers to go their employment and so on. But it's not OK to continue the Wednesday Bible Study how ever important that may be to its regular participants.

YOUTH WORK IN ENHANCED LEVEL 4 AREAS

Youth work should be delivered online. Face-to-face support should only take place for either providing support to education hubs for the children of essential workers or providing support for the most vulnerable young people who do not have other means of support and cannot access support remotely.

In circumstances where support to a vulnerable young person is required, this should be provided on a one to one basis (indoors or outdoors) with restriction measures in place. Places of Worship may be used for such emergency provision. However, a full and detailed risk assessment should be in place.

USING CHURCH BUILDINGS FOR RECORDING OR BROADCASTING SERVICES IN ENHANCED LEVEL 4

This is permissible and the worship leader is allowed to leave home to fulfil this activity. A number of people have asked about numbers who might be permitted – the minister, the organist, the “tech” person, the reader and so on.

Please remember that whenever we increase the number of people gathering we increase the risk of infection.

So it should be the absolute minimum number of people in the church for the task in hand and you should have a justification for each person you ask to be there – ask if it really couldn't be done without them being physically present. Prof Leitch assured us that the police will not be checking on compliance but we must take care of each other and it would be a terrible thing if our recording session became a place where the virus was spread.

RESOURCING ON-LINE WORSHIP

Many people have expressed their thanks for the services provided by the Moderator for the “Boxing Day Lockdown” – Sundays 27th December and 3rd and 10th January. The Covid Group has asked Martin to draw together new worship resources for the Sundays during the rest of this month and work on those has already begun. More details to follow but you can be assured that there will be everything from complete services to individuals service components for you to use – or not use – as you see fit.

Several people have asked for assistance with finding good music resources for their on-line worship.

- there are a number of audio files from CH4 hymns if you register for an account on the Church of Scotland Music Website (<https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/>).

- For copyright reasons it is not possible to provide downloads of videos with words on them. However Donald McCorkindale on his webpage (<http://itsforministry.org/music-videos>) is curating a list of hymns that churches have recorded and would be able to be used by other congregations with the appropriate licenses. These videos would not be stored on the site, rather a list of 'who to contact' to receive a copy. Donald is currently inviting churches who have such videos that they would be willing to share with others to contact him (dmccorkindale@churchofscotland.org.uk) to arrange the listing for others. The more churches that participate the greater the library of resources will be for people.

The Ecumenical Officer is also working with colleagues in the Church of England to see if access can be granted to their material on the Church Near You website.

DISTRIBUTING MATERIALS

A number of congregations are issuing materials such as newsletters, service transcripts and DVD's. The Covid Group recognise that these are important in keeping those without the access to technology connected with the church. However, as with the previous period of lockdown it is important that every care and precaution is made in preparing and distributing materials. This means

- One person, or as few people as possible, copies or prepares mailings and adheres to all proper hand hygiene guidelines
- Congregations should not be asking volunteers to break the legal duty to 'stay at home' to deliver such materials.
- Congregations should utilise Royal Mail (or another delivery company) to deliver the materials to members.

FURLOUGING PARISH MINISTERS

The Covid Group have been asked about parish ministers being furloughed where they had caring responsibilities for children not at school. The Interim Head, Convener, and Vice Convener of Faith Nurture Forum have looked in detail at the matter and do not feel that it is appropriate to furlough Parish Ministers. Where a Parish Minister has young children at home they should feel able to alter their working pattern to prioritise their week to allow for sufficient flexibility to share responsibility for children and ministry across the working week within the family unit. There will always be a willingness from colleagues to assist where genuine emergencies occur but Presbyteries also need to balance the well-being of ministers who would be required to provide interim moderator cover for a furloughed minister. At a time when more in communities are seeking the support of our churches it is important that all employees and office holders within a parish setting are able to provide necessary support.

CHURCH BUILDINGS AS VACCINATION CENTRES

With the encouragement of the Covid Group I repeated to Prof Leitch the Church of Scotland's willingness to assist with premises for the vaccination programme. I know of a couple of cases where this has been set up already and there may be others. Prof Leitch indicated his gratitude for the offer.

UPDATING OF GUIDANCE

We are working to update the Guidance on the web site and Version 8 will be issued shortly.

LOOKING AHEAD

The question of timescales was raised – when will the lockdown end and when will the churches reopen? Prof Leitch said, that in his view, we are probably talking two to three months rather than several weeks but it all depended on how successful the lockdown was in suppressing infection rates, virus prevalence and the progress of the vaccination programme.

We continue to engage with the Scottish Government on at least a weekly basis and we find that they are keen to hear our experience, understand our perspective and share their knowledge.

These are going to be the most difficult of times where we need to support each other. The vaccine holds out real hope of better days to come. May that be soon!

*George Whyte
On behalf of the Covid-19 group
6 January 2021*