

Guidance Concerning Limited Re-Opening of Church Buildings

On 5 May the House of Bishops met via Zoom to review advice to clergy on the Church's efforts to limit the spread of the coronavirus, to protect the vulnerable and health services. At that meeting the House gave further consideration as to how the Church of England might proceed, once the current restrictions for COVID-19 are relaxed or lifted, recognising that there have been some welcome signs of improvement in the current situation, including a reduction in new cases and hospital admissions giving evidence for hope.

While church buildings remain closed for public worship, in line with Government advice, the Bishops agreed in principle to a **phased approach** to lifting restrictions, with three broad stages as infection levels improve:

Phase 1 An initial immediate phase allowing very limited access to church buildings for activities such as recording or streaming of services or private prayer by an Incumbent or an appointed and authorised person in their own parish, so long as the necessary hygiene and physical distancing precautions are taken.

Phase 2 Subsequently access for some rites and ceremonies when allowed by law, observing appropriate physical distancing and hygiene precautions.

Phase 3 Worship services with limited congregations meeting, when Government restrictions are eased to allow this.

The House of Bishops agreed that the decision on the timing of when to revise diocesan advice should be made by individual Diocesan Bishops, to take account of their local situation. The Bishops were clear once again that this is guidance – not an instruction or law – and that it will be constantly reviewed depending on the national situation.

In Bath and Wells, we therefore propose the following:

- The diocese will continue to be guided by national advice and will take account of any national Public Health statements, reviewing our position as necessary.
- The diocese will seek to assess and monitor the regional impact of the virus across the diocese.
- The Incumbent or one appointed and authorised person (clergy or lay) may enter their assigned church building for the purpose of engaging in private or personal prayer, praying the Daily Office and/or celebrating the Eucharist (if clergy) on behalf of the community they serve, and to live stream or pre-record worship. They may not be accompanied by any person other than members of their own household with whom they are in lockdown.

- In anticipation of, and preparation for, phases 2 and 3, the diocese will offer advice on the requirements of physical distancing, washing of hands, cleaning of buildings, signage etc. as it becomes available nationally. **When the Government permits**, and in the light of National Church guidance, benefices can then identify what adaptations and provisions, may be necessary to buildings, routines and service provisions in order to move to phase 2 and 3, should they determine that they wish to do that.
- The diocese will provide consistent and clear instructions regarding necessary cleaning of hands and buildings that can be used for signage on all our church buildings.

Each Benefice will be asked to complete the following in order to move to Phase One:

- Agree whether they wish/are able, to reopen their church building for the limited purpose of Phase 1 (i.e. the Incumbent or one person appointed and authorized by the PCC entering the building for prayer and worship as above). Within a multi-parish benefice, decisions will need to be made about which church(es), if any, are to open. A proper inspection of the church building will be required before undertaking this.
- Agree who will be the one person authorised and appointed by the PCC to enter each church building – this should be agreed with the Incumbent, or deanery leadership (Area and Lay Dean) if in vacancy; Church Wardens; and PCC members.
- In making decisions, the following risks should be considered:
 - The personal health risk of the appointee ie. age, protection of themselves or family – no one should feel obliged to undertake this!
 - The proximity of the church building.
 - The suitability of the church building in terms of cleaning, prior to Phase 1 taking effect - does the church have water or alternative means of cleaning fully the furniture used, items touched, door handles turned etc?
- Benefices to inform their deanery leadership of the above decisions.
- Benefices to keep churches locked at all times and ensure that this is communicated, and that signage is clearly displayed on all church doors/gates re hygiene requirements, physical distancing etc.

Please refer to the Archdeacon's Office if you have any concerns or questions. Further updates about maintenance of buildings and churchyards will follow and updates will be provided via the Diocesan Website.

Bishop Peter and Bishop Ruth
11 May 2020