

Guidelines for getting ready to gather again



As lockdown restrictions gradually ease, congregations need to consider how they will begin to resume activities and what practical steps need to be taken to allow them to do so responsibly within the regulations determined by government public health bodies. This document is designed to assist kirk sessions as they think through and prepare to lead congregations in the journey from lockdown.

Two accompanying resources are drawn from the content contained here and are issued along with it:

- a **Resumption of activities checklist**, intended to aid practical preparations for reopening
- a **Stay safe at church** guide setting out the responsibilities of every member on return.

While many of the practical issues outlined in this document can and should be delegated to congregational committees and other key leaders, it remains the responsibility of kirk session to take the decisions and to do so carefully, thoughtfully and using the best advice and guidance available from government, statutory agencies, insurers and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Be sure to inform your insurer of your intention to recommence activities and take cognisance of any advice or instruction provided by them.

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READY OR NOT?

Meeting together with brothers and sisters in Christ is central to Christian life and a primary expression of church as the family of God. Our inability to meet due to necessary implementation of lockdown restrictions has been a source of much sadness and frustration.

Nevertheless, the simple instruction to suspend all activities was more straightforward to follow and implement than the gradual return to a variety of church life will be. So, the question of our readiness to begin to gather again will involve many careful considerations about what is possible, responsible and desirable as some restrictions remain in place.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

This document is intended to help kirk sessions and congregational committees carefully and prayerfully work through the necessary thinking and preparations involved in putting things in place to allow congregations to begin to gather together. It will be important your kirk session discuss these matters. The kirk session should decide when organisations and activities resume and approve the dates for restarting any activity. The detailed arrangements around assessing risk and practical arrangements about opening up, seating and cleaning are matters for which responsibility may be delegated to the congregational committee.

A first word, not the last word

Expect the situation to evolve, so be prepared to pay attention to further advice and instruction from government, the denomination, and insurance companies. Do not act against their advice or regulations as this puts the congregation at significant risk in terms of liability. Nothing in this summary can be taken to supersede official advice and policy. If necessary, an updated version of this document may be issued with changes highlighted, at which point it will supersede any advice offered previously.

Further documents will be issued at the appropriate time detailing specific guidelines for:

- recommencing children's and youth activities and organisations
- administering the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

SHARED JOURNEY. DIFFERENT PACE

Each congregation's circumstances will be different and they will come to a variety of decisions about what activities to recommence and how quickly. That should be expected and is entirely appropriate. However, the journey towards resumption for every congregation will involve similar stages. This document is therefore split into three parts:

- Planning ahead
- Preparing your buildings
- Practicing social distancing.

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1. Planning ahead

Although it may feel like we are unable to do anything in this present moment, it is important to do what we can to begin to plan ahead. Congregations should expect church life to resume bit by bit as lockdown restrictions are gradually lifted.

The social distancing phase is very likely to continue for many months after the lockdown until the pandemic ends, or a vaccine is found meaning the threat of widespread reinfection passes. So, let's be prepared to respond to opportunities as they unfold and to navigate obstacles that we can anticipate.

STARTING SMALL

It is likely that the number of people allowed to gather in a church building initially will be very restricted. This may influence the type of gathering a kirk session should permit or choose to allow to take place e.g. a prayer gathering or Bible study rather than a worship service. As much thought, if not more, needs to be given to these opportunities as they will involve the church hall and each of its rooms, not just the main worship area.

Be aware that it may be some time before organised groups can meet in private homes or the manse for Bible study, youth fellowship and other off site activities, so consideration may need to be given as to how to relocate them to the church building if they are to be restarted.

Any necessary particular arrangements for children's and youth ministry are only likely to become clearer later in the process of recommencing. Further advice will be issued as and when possible.

LEARNING ALONG THE WAY

It will be wise to take some time to think about what we have learned during the period of lockdown. What are the primary core activities of church life that we need to resume and maintain? Which things that we have always done seem less of a priority going forward? Are there areas in which we have grown in confidence in doing things differently or doing different things?

There will be another time and another way to give more attention to these big questions, but for now, they may helpfully guide our thinking about what priorities for a phased return have emerged.

THINKING ABOUT DIFFERENT GROUPS

Not everyone may be able to come back to church activities at the same time. Certain groups may need to remain shielded for longer than others. Do not encourage those who should remain shielded to return to church, even if that means that activities, including public worship, do not resume in your congregation as quickly as you might desire.

The age profile of your membership will also be a significant consideration, with an older demographic representing a potential indicator that a return to some activities and gathering for worship should continue on hold. This may also be true if your minister or other regular key leaders are at increased risk from catching the virus.

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You will also need to think about how best you can communicate that some things have restarted and the building is now open to regular members, those in organisations and the local community. This may involve using websites, social media, church noticeboards, telephone contact, or socially distanced calls or delivery of updates with members at home.

FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T ATTEND

When you do begin to gather again for any activity and public worship in particular, some additional, or alternative, provision may need to continue to be made for those unable to return immediately. This may involve some of the ways you have been resourcing the congregation during the lockdown, however it will be important not to place too many demands on already busy members as normal patterns of church life begin to return and also need to be resourced.

If producing and distributing worship recordings to those still at home, remember that some scientific research suggests that COVID-19 can remain active on metal and plastic surfaces for up to three days and on paper or cardboard for 24 hours. So do implement some basic sanitisation measures for those delivering materials.

THE KEEN AND THE NOT SO KEEN

Be aware that many older members are likely to be resistant to the idea of staying away from church activities any longer. They may well have missed them the most. Think about how you will emphasise the importance of them following appropriate advice. However, the opposite may also be true with some members anxious about returning and choosing to stay away initially. It will be pastorally wise to consider how to sensitively and patiently build their confidence to come back. It must be made clear that anyone displaying any of the symptoms of COVID-19, or who have been in close contact with any who have displayed symptoms, should not attend church activities under any circumstances.

Some of your more vulnerable elders and office-holders may feel under pressure to resume their duties. Be careful to shield them from that danger as well as coronavirus. Do not allow pressure to be exerted upon anyone, even if it means that key people may not be available. This includes those who normally open, close or clean your building, or who lead in worship. Expect to get used to altering plans, being more flexible and involving others for an extended period.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO? WHAT CAN WE KEEP DOING?

Only hold more formal meetings of congregational leaders when absolutely essential. Postpone non-urgent kirk session and congregational committee business or find ways to transact it digitally, keeping careful minutes of each meeting and decision.

Think about the sustainability of any programme you are thinking of restarting. Might you be better recommencing with a one off trial, fortnightly or monthly, instead of every week?



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CONGREGATIONAL FINANCES

Hopefully already some members will have taken up the option to make their regular giving by standing order and this should continue to be encouraged. Bank transfers might also be encouraged. Many members will however, prefer to use their Freewill Offering and other envelopes and will hopefully have continued to set these aside on a weekly basis. Depending on when the next opportunity is for members to put these on the offering plate it may be worth considering how such envelopes could be safely collected being fully aware that there are fraudsters who have identified this as an opportunity. Authorise an elder, committee member or someone who is known to the individual to collect the envelopes and consider giving advance notice of such a visit. Notify members that envelopes can be left at appointed hours at the church office if you have one.

It is also important to sensitively communicate the financial needs of the congregation and wider church to members without putting any pressure on anyone, or making anyone feel guilty. Please remember that some members may be facing considerably reduced levels of income and may not have been able to give at their previous level, or indeed be able to resume doing so. Look at your budget and revise if necessary – are there areas of expenditure that can be reduced or delayed without causing problems in the future? Encourage members to direct their giving to the areas of most need.

Contact the Financial Secretary's Department in Assembly Buildings if you have any general queries about your finances or the amounts collected from your congregation on a quarterly basis.





2. Preparing your buildings

We have a responsibility to our members and wider society to continue to do our part in minimising virus spread, and that will mean ongoing inconvenience for us all.

As we journey towards any sort of reopening of our buildings to resume activities there are a number of practical measures we must work through.

START WITH A WALK THROUGH

Undertake a walkthrough of the buildings, checking for anything that might present a danger to users or is in need of attention and undertake repairs.

CHECK YOUR WATER SUPPLY

If your water supply has not been drained down during the lockdown, you will need to make sure that every tap is run for a minimum of 20 minutes. Instant hot water systems need to be set to 60°C to kill off the legionella bacterium. If you have any further concerns contact and get further advice from statutory authorities or other experts.

UNDERTAKE A CLEAN UP

If nobody has been accessing your building for some weeks then the virus will not have survived on any hard surfaces. Even if it has only been visited for security or a single person livestreaming worship, clean every surface that might have been touched within the last week. Remember pews, chairs, tables, microphones, pulpit, lectern, door handles etc. Don't assume your usual anti-bacterial cleaners will be effective. Check with your normal suppliers that cleaning materials are appropriate if necessary.

SETTING UP TO GATHER

We must prepare our buildings for gathering again assuming that social distancing measures will remain in place. People outside their own household group will at present have to be seated at least two metres apart with any future changes in this statutory requirement continuing to be observed. This limits the capacity of the rooms you use in your buildings, including your worship area. You might need to think about limiting numbers at first, splitting into more than one group and using different rooms. If so, bear in mind safeguarding issues and required ratios of adults to children. If possible, some windows or doors should be left open for ventilation.

Think about each space you want to use, including entrance areas. Measure them and either place two metre marks with tape on the floor, or set out chairs two metres apart. Remember that some family and household groups will be allowed to sit together. So, as well as individual seating, you will need to create seating in groups of various sizes.

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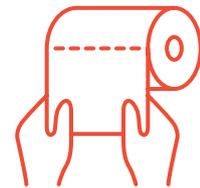
Where seating is fixed, mark out seating for use and areas which must be kept free. Remember that the two metre rule will need to be observed in each individual pew, but also in front and behind.

Do not leave extra chairs sitting around to avoid people lifting them to create their own seating arrangements. If possible store them away. If that cannot be done, clearly mark them with a sign that says 'not to be used'.

In preparing people to return, kirk session should communicate that the cooperation of members will be key to ensuring a safe environment for everyone. The restrictions on seating will mean that members will not be able to choose their seat but will be asked to accept the seating arrangements that have been provided for their safety and the safety of the whole church family.

TOILETS

You may choose to close toilet facilities, or limit the number available. If so, you will need to ensure users of the buildings are made aware of this in advance. If toilets remain open, ensure an adequate supply of soap or hand sanitiser is provided and that cleaning processes are in place.



PREPARATIONS FOR ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE

Eventually we will all get used to this new way of having to do things, but the first time people come back to each activity we will need to prepare them in advance for what to expect. You might want to put some details on your church website or share it on social media. As numbers able to gather initially are likely to be limited, or because seating capacity is reduced by social distancing, you may need to ask those intending to attend to sign up in advance of a meeting, either online or by telephone. In calculating capacity, retain some seating to facilitate visitors if necessary

Specific instructions might include an encouragement to move immediately to sit down on arrival and not to crowd entrance areas; details about a one-way system for entry and exit and that might be necessary to navigate any aisles, corridors or doorways throughout the building that are less than two metres wide; appropriate arrangements for the use of soap or hand sanitiser provided in entrance and exit areas; an encouragement not to wait around to chat after a meeting or service. Prepare clear signage for your building that will be easy for everyone to read and quickly understand.

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ONGOING CLEANING AND ARRANGING SEATING

After any gathering it will be necessary to clean as appropriate and in some cases rearrange the seating. You may need to recruit additional support for cleaning, caretaking and setting out or stacking seating. Wiping down all surfaces as you go, immediately after use of the premises, is far more effective than a weekly deep clean. Remember this includes chairs, tables, microphones and door handles. Alternatively, you might like to consider employing the services of a professional cleaning contractor, at least in the short-term, when activities resume.

HOSTING OTHER USER GROUPS

If we judge it wise to continue to offer hospitality to other user groups all of the above needs to apply to them while using church premises. Do not take for granted that they will understand that. It will be vital to communicate responsibilities well so that necessary measures and good relationships are maintained. It will be important to take advice from your insurer regarding hosting outside groups i.e. all groups not under the authority of kirk session. It will also be necessary to revisit the agreements entered into with such user groups and to amend such agreements in light of advice from insurers and the cleaning protocols agreed by kirk session for church groups that will also apply to other user groups to ensure the buildings remain a safe environment for all users.



3. Practicing socially distanced worship

Given that gathering for worship in larger numbers is only likely to be allowed in the latter phases of lifting of lockdown restrictions, a few previous experiments with smaller gatherings might provide wise stepping stones to resuming to gather again for Sunday worship. They may prove crucial in building the confidence of members to return, help them get used to what meeting with social distancing involves and ensure our ability to implement necessary basic measures around health and safety.

DISTANCED AND/OR DIGITAL?

During lockdown congregations have been innovative in finding ways to continue ministry in a variety of digital forms. Perhaps to limit the possibility of spreading the virus, even when restrictions are lifted, it may be wise to think about continuing to operate digitally, or to move to a mixture of digital and socially distanced face-to-face gatherings. Remember every time you choose to meet together a lot of extra work will be involved, so don't let enthusiasm get the better of you. If you intend to increase seating capacity by offering overflow space in the church halls, the same principles around set up and cleaning will apply to that area. Be aware that restrictions may continue to apply during important seasons of the church year such as harvest, remembrance and Christmas. Begin to think about how these might be appropriately marked and celebrated, whether digitally or in distanced worship.

TOGETHER AGAIN, BUT IN NEW WAYS

Sunday worship is the beating heart of congregational life. We all want to get back to enjoying being together again in God's presence for praise, prayer and preaching as soon as we can. However there are basic considerations that relate particularly to our service of worship to think about before we can recommence. Who will be available to take part and lead worship and who will be available to form the congregation? Is resuming physically-gathered public worship safe and viable yet? If not, do not be afraid to say, 'this is not yet the right time to resume.' Leadership means taking the right decisions, even when they are difficult. Other specific things to consider include the following:

Welcome: For the foreseeable future, assume that a friendly handshake is not appropriate as you welcome people to worship and other activities. If you are going to retain the services of a welcome team they should know this and follow good practice. It will also not be possible to distribute hard copies of announcement sheets as people arrive or distribute hymnbooks, bibles or magazines. Where it is not possible to project words on a screen, members can be encouraged to either bring their own hymnbook and Bible with them or take copies from the church for their personal use until such times as all restrictions have been lifted.

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Children's ministry: We should not assume that all leaders and workers in children's ministry will be able or ready to resume their previous activities just as before. Carefully consider how you will protect both children and adults they are in contact with from transmitting or contracting the virus. Is the room you use large enough to allow appropriate distancing? Are the children of an age where they won't need to be in close contact with leaders? Will they be capable of observing social distancing? Might it be better to offer good quality all-age, intergenerational worship instead of 'sending the children out'? If so, what would provision for that involve?

Singing: Give thought to your order of service. It is possible that restrictions will remain for some time on singing in public worship due to some scientific research suggesting that the deeper breathing associated with singing can project water droplets, and thus coronavirus, far beyond the two metres required for social distancing. You must not act against official guidance and whatever restrictions are insisted upon. So, you may have to think about ways of playing music as an aid to praise and reflection rather than singing.

Perhaps you will offer a service organised around only the reading of the Word, preaching and prayer. Might this be an opportunity to rediscover the value of periods of silent reflection and response in worship? Give careful thought to the creative use of material on screen where that facility is available. Helpful free material for download can be found at www.engageworship.org. Should singing be permitted, expect that arranging space for a choir or praise band will require more than two metres social distancing and that choirs or music groups will have to be kept as small as possible.

Leading and preaching: Set up so that ministers and others with a formal part in the service, where possible, can be at least four metres away from the front row of the congregation while leading or preaching.

The offering: Passing the offering plate along rows must not be your practice for the foreseeable future. Encourage bank standing orders/transfers. Consider a basket at the back of church for people to leave their gifts as they enter, but be mindful of security. Remember to include those gifts offered through bank transfers in the prayer of dedication. Anyone handling cash should wear gloves for counting and banking.

Pastoral care and prayer ministry: The continued use of digital communication and telephone calls will remain the principle way of delivering pastoral care until further restrictions are lifted. This also applies to praying with people.

The sacraments: With regard to the administration of the sacraments, further consideration is ongoing and documents giving guidance will follow in due course.

Tea and coffee: You must not use kitchens or serve tea and coffee before or after worship due to the challenges of physical distancing and the hygiene of handling and washing cups and spoons, serving biscuits, and the extra work involved in wiping down tables and serving surfaces after use.

Give thought to your order of service. It is possible that restrictions will remain for some time on singing in public worship.



Cleaning the sanctuary: Ensuring that your worship area remains clean of the virus is important. You may wish to wipe down all surfaces as you go, remembering that doing so immediately after use is more effective than a weekly deep clean. Remember this includes pews, chairs, tables, microphones, sound desk, pulpit, lectern and door handles. Alternatively, if your building is only used once a week, and not reused for a funeral or other service within 72 hours, you may choose to clean it in advance of the next use.

Social distancing and sanitisation are primary weapons in the battle against coronavirus, so we need to balance our ability to comply with all these needs with an understandable desire to get up and going again.



FOR FURTHER ADVICE

As lockdown regulations begin to ease for churches many questions about the fine detail of what is involved in gathering again as congregations will arise.

This document has attempted to cover the basic principles to be applied as known at present. Remember, further guidelines on specific matters will be issued in due course, however, if particular questions remain, the Clerk of the General Assembly receives regular updates from the public health authorities and is contactable at pa-clerk@presbyterianireland.org.

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