

The following document sets out the protocols have been put in place in preparation for our return to worshipping in our churches in our Group of Parishes and also identifies certain risks and outlines how we will manage and reduce/eliminate those risks and was drawn up in line with both Government guidelines and the protocols drawn up by the House of Bishops.

You may wish to refer to the Podcast "[Back to church: what's it going to be like?](#)" for a synopsis of this document which highlights those parts most relevant to you as a parishioner.

Covid 19 Return to Worshipping in Church Protocols The Mountmellick Group of Parishes

Stage 1

Communicating with workers and parishioners prior to opening on a specific date

1. Appropriate consultation with all workers has taken place ('Worker' here refers to those involved with leading the Service and providing musical accompaniment).
2. Return to work form for workers have been returned to the Diocesan Office
3. A plan for dealing with suspected case of COVID-19 during the Service has been devised (see Stage 6).
4. This document is being made available on our Parish Website in text form and in synopsis via podcast as well as in printed form in Church to provide clear guidelines as to how services will be conducted and what is expected of parishioners
5. Those who are in the High Risk and Very High Risk categories in relation to Covid 19 must remember that, while the Church is reopening and the precautions are being taken to reduce the risk of any infection, the risk of infection still exists. Anyone in these categories should consider the relevant risks before making any decision in relation to attending public worship at this time.
6. We would ask everyone intending to return to public worship to obey the following advice: **'Please do not attend church if you or a member of your household is experiencing, or recovering from, symptoms of COVID-19, and seek medical advice'**.
Notices to this effect shall be displayed outside our churches.
7. Public Health Signage, as recommended under public health guidelines, shall be displayed at entrances to churches in such a way as to avoid creating bottlenecks.

Stage 2

Preparing church for worship

1. A COVID-19 response plan has been developed

- a. the COVID-19 response plan will be updated as required;
- b. The Covid 19 response plan should now be viewed alongside our Health and Safety statement and considered complimentary
- c. In drawing up these protocols as part of our Covid 19 response plan, relevant risks have been considered;
- d. In drawing up these protocols as part of our Covid 19 response plan account has been made of individual workers' risk factors;
- e. Included in our Covid 19 response plan are guidelines for dealing with a suspected case of Covid 19 during the Service;
- f. Included in this plan are controls to address identified risks;
- g. Include in this plan are the actions required in the event of identified risk incidents;
- h. These plans have been developed in consultation with Bishop Pat Storey and the Diocesan Clergy and shall be communicated to workers and parishioners via internet and print.

2. Given that the 5th July is the first day for the return to church, we shall follow our normal monthly routine of having a Group Service in St John's, Coolbanagher at 10.45am and shall reopen all 3 churches for worship the following Sunday, the common monthly pattern resuming until further notice.

3. Update risk assessment

In determining the safe capacity of churches, it should be recognised that members of the same household may share the same pew. Approximate capacity based on 2m distancing: for St Brigid's is 20-30, for St Paul's is 45-50 and for St John's is 35-40

The potential risk posed by legionella which may be present in stagnant water in building that have been closed for a prolonged period so taps will be run and toilets flushed repeatedly.

4. Hand sanitiser to be provided at entrances and exits

Care to be taken to avoid bottlenecks on entering and leaving church. Stewarding may be required.

5. Tissues to be provided.

While tissues will be provided, people should be strongly encouraged to bring their own tissues. Coughs and sneezes should be directed into a tissue or the crook of one's arm, respectively.

6. No-touch bins shall be provided for the disposal of used face coverings, gloves etc.

7. Routine cleaning ECDC guidelines suggest that coronavirus may survive for up to 72 hours on hard surfaces. Additional cleaning may be required where churches are used for services during the week, e.g. for funerals. Cleaning should be carried out in accordance with guidelines issued by appropriate health authorities. (see Stage 9)

8. Workers with symptoms of COVID-19: Diocesan Readers and Organists shall inform the Rector. The Rector shall inform the Bishop and Archdeacon, before informing the Church Wardens

9. Social distancing practices are to be followed by those who regularly clean the church or arrange flowers to reduce the risk of the spread of Covid 19.

10. People will be advised to leave adequate space between themselves and others to ensure that the relevant guidelines on social distancing are followed. This will involve sitting in at least every other pew and leaving sufficient distance between themselves and others on the pew and not sitting directly in front of or directly behind others. We are sure that familiarity with social distancing guidelines and common sense will enable us to reduce the risk of the spread of Covid 19. Members of the same household can share a pew, but otherwise social distancing must be observed.

11. Service sheets, instead of prayer books may be used (although the maximum lifespan of the virus on surfaces being 72 hours should mean that it is safe to use prayer books).

Parishioners are encouraged to bring their own prayer books and hymn books.

12. Should a bottleneck develop, we may have to remove Prayer books from the porch to ensure that social distancing may be observed in common areas. This problem may not arise

13. Minimise notices etc. in porch that may delay people on entering or leaving the Church. Churches must comply with public health guidelines regarding signage, but care should be taken to ensure that signage does not create bottleneck on entering or leaving churches.

Stage 3

Arrival at church

1. The Rector will wear a face covering (a face shield) during Services. Current government and public health authority advice suggests that face coverings should be used when people are in an enclosed space with others, however, the wearing of a face covering in church is not currently mandatory. We recognise that face coverings may be inadvisable for some people, e.g. asthmatics. The rule of thumb is that Government advice should be followed.

2. Please do not congregate in car park or at church doors, but move smoothly into the church to reduce bottlenecks and increased risk of infection.

Stage 4

Entering church

1. Hand sanitisers will be available in the outer and inner porch, please use these to clean your hands before taking your seat (and when leaving) unless you have your own hand sanitiser with you. Remember "Joe says, 'wash your hands.'"
2. Please follow social distancing guidelines when choosing where to sit and leave a suitable space between yourself and other worshippers. Try to offset where you sit on the pew in relation to those who may already be seated in front of or behind you. Please show understanding if you are not able to sit where you normally do.]

Stage 5

Contact tracing

1. A record will be kept of those present at our Services to assist the HSE with contract tracing should someone subsequently become unwell and test positive for Covid 19. As 14 days is the usual incubation period for Covid 19, these records will be destroyed after 28 days.

Stage 6

During the Service

1. The officiating ministers shall wear a face shield during the Service and shall move around the church only to access the lectern and pulpit. At Holy Communion, parishioners will be asked to stay in their seats and the Rector will bring the Holy Communion to each parishioner who wishes to receive. Due to the risk of infection, Holy Communion is by bread only at present. Social distancing rules apply during services and special guidelines are currently in place for Holy Baptism.
2. As researches have suggested that singing may increase risk of spreading COVID no singing can take place during our Service at present.
3. Instruments should not be shared during a service. Touching of surfaces by different musicians should be avoided.
4. No physical exchange of the peace. A socially distanced smile shall have to suffice.
5. Because of the possibility of Covid 19 being spread by touching of the lectern and lectern Bible only one person should read from the lectern at this time.
6. Shorter services to be preferred because the risk of transmission of Covid 19 is related to duration of contact as well as proximity.

7. Alms will not be collected during the Service as we are used to but rather offerings may be placed in the collection plates at the back of the Church before you leave.

8. While people will be reminded not to enter the Church building if they are experiencing Covid 19 related symptoms; should someone become ill during the Service and manifest Covid 19 related symptoms, the person will be asked to return home and seek medical assistance. If the person has travelled to church by themselves and is too ill to take themselves home safely, the Church shall be evacuated while an ambulance is called.

Stage 7

Leaving church

1. The Rector shall announce the procedure for leaving the church at the end of service.

2. The procedure for leaving is simply to leave pew by pew, beginning with those nearest the exit door first, to avoid walking by other parishioners and therefore reducing the risk of spreading Covid 19.

3. To avoid bottlenecks on departure the Rector will not go to the west door to speak to parishioners simply to avoid clusters of people in close proximity.

4. No- touch bins will be available for disposal of face coverings, tissues etc, if required.

5. Please remember to wash your hands with the hand sanitisers in the inner or outer porch as you leave.

Stage 8

After service

1. Post-service tea & coffee provide an additional risk of infection and so cannot be offered under current circumstances.

Stage 9

Cleaning of churches

1. Requirements for cleaning of churches, particularly 'deep cleaning'
The limited lifespan of the coronavirus, combined with the interval between church services, may make deep cleaning/decontamination unnecessary. Where less than 72 hours elapses between services, for example to hold a funeral, additional cleaning may be required.

Antibacterial wipes will be left in the church to ensure that the volunteers who are cleaning the church can use them to clean frequently touched surfaces such as door handles the top edge of the pew etc

2. Because toilets must be cleaned after each use, toilets in the church are not available for use at present unless in an emergency. Antibacterial wipes will be

left in the toilet for the cleaning of the places of contact, such as seat, handle, tap etc.

Remote Services

1. We recognise that those in the Very High Risk and High Risk categories in relation to Covid 19 infection will be unable to return to worshipping in Church at present, so the Sunday Service Podcast will continue to be posted each Friday on the Parish website. We also recognise that not everyone has access to the internet. If you have a parent, friend or relative whom you visit under the social distancing guidelines, you might consider downloading the Sunday Service Podcast onto your phone and playing it as part of your visit.

Funeral Services

1. From the 29th June Government guidelines permit 25 people to gather inside a Church for a Funeral Service.

Overall Capacity

1. At the time of writing the government restricts the numbers present inside a Church to no more than 50. This will increase to no more than 100 by late July. Numbers permitted in each of our churches is limited by social distancing restrictions. Approximate capacity for our churches with 2m social distancing in place is: St Brigid's 20-30, St Paul's 45-50 and St John's 35-40