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Frequently Asked Questions for Scottish Episcopal Churches in Scottish Government Phase 3

The following questions and answers amplify and give examples of what is permissible in Phase 3 of the Scottish Government lockdown easing. This is a complex phase for all of Scottish society and for us as churches and there will inevitably be areas that are subjective and require local contexts to be judged. For more detailed queries please contact your Diocesan Bishop/office.

Churches Re-opening for Congregational Worship

Q: When will SEC churches re-open?

A: Church CAN open from 15th July but do not HAVE TO. Each vestry will judge when to open, based on the nature of the building, the usual size of congregation, the age and health of the clergy and congregation and many other factors. Some churches may open immediately, some may not open until Phase 4 of lockdown easing. There is no pressure for churches to open sooner than they wish.

Q: Does a church need the consent of a bishop to re-open?

A: Yes. The Bishop has oversight and care of all the congregations in the Diocese and will exercise this oversight and care by approving applications for re-opening for church activities.

Q: Do we have to have communion/eucharistic services if we re-open?

A: No. There is the usual discretion on the part of the Rector and vestry to offer non-eucharistic worship (e.g. morning prayer, Service of the Word, non-liturgical worship etc.). Canon 22.6 requires eucharistic worship on Sundays (“when in the opinion of the Bishop it is reasonably practicable”): coming out of a pandemic you can assume that your bishop will be open to your sensible and pragmatic approach as to what is appropriate.

Q: Not all the ‘usual’ congregation can fit in our church with physical distancing and/or the cap of 50: should we wait to re-open until all can attend?

A: This is a pastoral decision: churches may choose to offer a mix of online and in-person worship, or managed system of booking spaces or more than one service per Sunday. There are many options: discuss with the bishop.

Q: What is the guidance on liturgy books?

A: The Phase 3 Guidance is that projected words or single use printed liturgies are the lowest risk options from a virus control viewpoint. Some churches are encouraging their members to have their ‘own’ liturgy books that they bring to services each week (and some spares for new people). The latest Phase 3 guidance also says that re-usable liturgy books, left in church,

could be used as a higher risk option if left untouched between services, in a reasonably high temperature for 7 days. If you have any concerns about the potential risks involved, it would be wise to continue to use the preferred options of projection, single use sheets or personal booklets.

Q: Why are 50 allowed for worship but only 20 at weddings and funerals?

A: The Scottish Government have made decisions about the exceptions that can be made to strict ongoing lockdown and have judged the risks associated with these. Their judgement, to avoid large gatherings but allow spiritual comfort to be found, is that those numbers are appropriate for those types of service during this part of Phase 3.

Q: Can people who are 'vulnerable' (including those who are over 70) come to church or carry out duties associated with a return to worship in Phase 3?

A: As of 3rd August 2020, anyone who was shielding in Scotland is able to follow the same rules and guidance as the rest of the population of Scotland. For all in Scotland (including the over 70s). All of us have to judge what aspects of church life they feel confident to participate in as the pandemic continues and those with concerns over their health and vulnerability to Covid-19 may well choose to remain away from public worship or open churches. Please treat all such concerns with respect and care.

Q: Why can't we sing in church?

A: There may be an increased risk of generating infectious aerosol droplets while singing. The Scottish Government guidance issued for Phase 3 says:

“...scientific and medical advice around the transmission risk of activities such as singing, chanting, shouting and the playing of wind or other instruments that require breath to operate is still being developed. This activity should be avoided both in congregational worship and in rehearsal.

“...where essential to an act of worship, a single individual may sing or chant behind a Plexi-glass screen. Any screen used should be cleaned regularly.”

Q: I usually give my neighbour (not in my household) a lift to church: can I do that?

A: The official position as reinforced by the First Minister on the 23 September (and as stated on the [Transport Scotland website on 8th Sep](#)) remains that you should only travel with members of your own, or extended, household. They recognise that there may be occasions when there is no alternative but to travel with people outwith your household: but we would suggest that attendance at church, whilst important, is not such an urgent occasion.

Q: Do we have to wear face coverings in church services?

A: Yes, the wearing of a face covering in a place of worship has been made mandatory by the Scottish Government. There are some limited exceptions applicable to the person leading a worship service who does not need to wear

a covering provided that **either** there is partition (eg screen) between that person and anyone else **or** a distance of at least 2 metres is maintained between that person and any other person. Certain categories of individual are legally excused from wearing face coverings, including children under 5. Also, there is a defence of “reasonable excuse” for not wearing a face covering which is available to those who cannot, without severe distress, put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment or disability and also where it is necessary to seek medical assistance, or to provide care or assistance to a vulnerable person

Q: May I bring my children to church?

A: Yes. Sunday school activities linked directly to the main act of worship are allowed. Where children are in the “main service” rather than a separate activity they should sit in family groups and young children should remain close to their parent or guardian to ensure that physical distancing is maintained. Separate children’s activities may be offered provided that appropriate risk assessment and planning has been undertaken and approved by the Diocesan Bishop. Toys or games used during children’s activities should be washed before next use.

Q: Can young people attend (non-main worship) church activities?

A: Check with the local church for what might be on offer. From the Phase 3 guidance: Other activities (not in a main worship service) for children and young people, considered as “unregulated”, has been permitted to resume with effect from 31 August, provided Government guidance is adhered to. It is available at the following link and at the time of issue remains “provisional” and so it is recommended that the link is checked regularly for any updates: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-organised-activities-for-children/>

Q: In Phase 3 can a service leader take a service in more than one church (or multiple services in the same church) on the same Sunday?

A: Yes: There would not appear to be any restriction on being able to taking multiple services in church(es) on the same Sunday in Phase 3 as long as distancing and hygiene standards are maintained. If multiple services are to take place in the same building, a practical consideration will be the need to clean the building between services. The Advisory Group’s Phase 3 Guidance includes information about cleaning.

Q: Can we receive the consecrated wine as well as the consecrated bread?

A: The Bishops’ guidance remains to only receive in one kind, i.e. the bread. The College of Bishops is well aware of the breadth of theological and ecclesiological views that a broad church like the SEC holds and differing views on what might constitute ‘full communion’. The debates on this are well worth exploring as a church, but as we emerge from a pandemic our priority must be to minimise the risk of virus transmission. The Government Guidance on this says:

“the consumption of food and drink is avoided where it is not essential to the act of worship. Where it is essential to the act of worship, the use of communal vessels is avoided”

The simplest, safest (if maybe unsatisfactory for some) way of sharing Holy Communion/the Eucharist is to just share the bread as the essential element of this ritual. The addition of wine by any means: individual cups, intincted drops on wafers etc. all add extra levels of complexity, and hence risk, in the safe management of distribution of elements.

For a church where this is a major issue, the answer may be to delay the resumption of eucharistic worship until such time as the Government Guidance is further relaxed.

Q: What are rules on using the toilets in church for a service?

A: The guidance in the Phase 3 Advisory Group paper should be followed, but the Government have produced guidance at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-public-and-customer-toilets-guidance/>

Pastoral Visiting & Housegroups – activities in private homes

Please note: all guidance below on meeting indoors may be locally superseded by ‘local lockdowns’ if declared by the Scottish Government.

Q: Can a cleric or lay pastoral visitor still make pastoral visits or take home communion to church members after 23 September 2020 and the ban on visits to private homes?

A: Yes. Visits to vulnerable or isolated people, made by clergy or trained pastoral visitors and following strict hygiene and distancing protocols, are allowed by the Scottish Government regulations. These visits (classed as for ‘work purposes, or for the provision of voluntary or charitable services’) must be judged as essential and no cleric or pastoral visitor should make any visit when they are concerned about their own health or wellbeing.

Q: How many pastoral visits per day can we make when in Phase 3?

A: The 10th July Government Guidance on meeting others (which still applies in this case) says you can meet with up to four households in total each day, indoors and outdoors, as long as the 14 Sep & 23 Sep revisions to meeting others is followed (two households, up to six people in each meeting). Please also note the answer to the previous FAQ.

Q: Can someone meet with a cleric in the Rectory or the church?

A: Meeting in private houses (which a Rectory is) is not permitted except for essential pastoral visiting. Meeting in public spaces such as churches is permissible, as long as the rules on households and numbers are followed.

Q: Can housegroups or other small church meetings now take place?

A: Again, applying the Government Guidance on meeting others means that indoor meetings of this kind in private houses are not permitted. In public spaces a meeting might be possible, but only with members of two households able to be together indoors with physical distancing and subject to an overall maximum of six people. It is very unlikely that a housegroup or small group would fall within this definition (or would be willing to limit attendance to the same limit).

Other Activities in Churches & Church Premises

Q: Can physically distanced vestry meetings take place in church buildings?

A: No: under the Government Guidance for meeting others, meetings are only permitted with members of two households able to be together indoors or outdoors subject to an overall maximum of 6 people. This would exclude all vestries from being able to meet at this stage of Phase 3. The rules on physically distanced numbers in church for worship do not apply to meetings or other non-worship activities.

Q. Can non-SEC hall/church tenants/users restart their activities in SEC church buildings or halls?

A: Scottish Government guidance for Community Centres is expected in the near future, which is hoped to provide more guidance on potential hall users. At present, user groups/tenants who are permitted to restart under Scottish Government guidelines (e.g. nurseries preparing to start work) may resume their activities with physical distancing and hygiene measures in place. A clear agreement must be made between the vestry and the tenant/user over who will manage hygiene/contacts etc. around the specific activities.

Q. Can other denominations/faiths start worship in an SEC church building?

A. Yes: if the vestry ensure that they follow their own parent charity's guidance and get clear agreement on who will do cleaning/contacts etc.

Q: Can a worship team/group meet in church to rehearse and record worship?

A: Yes, as long as the rules of safe worship in the church building are followed.

Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals, Ordinations etc.

Q: Can weddings and funerals happen and take place indoors?

A: Yes, with a cap on total numbers of 20 congregation members attending (indoors or outdoors). The officiant and other 'staff' at the venue (e.g. musicians, welcomers) are not included in the total. The same constraints on physical distancing and hygiene also apply. Specific guidance is given on this in the Pastoral Guidelines.

Q: Can baptisms take place?

A: Yes: in the context of a church service, with the appropriate limits on numbers and with distancing and hygiene. The Government Guidance states: “where rituals or ceremonies require water to be applied to the body, full immersion is avoided and only small volumes are splashed onto the body. Where an infant is involved a parent/guardian should hold the infant. Strict hand hygiene should be maintained throughout.”

There is specific guidance on hand hygiene for e.g. anointing candidates in the Bishops’ Pastoral Guidance for Phase 3.

Q: Can ordinations take place?

A: Again, yes: in the context of a church service, with the appropriate limits on numbers and with distancing and hygiene. The same specific guidance applies for e.g. anointing and laying hands on candidates. Theologically and canonically, the bishop is required to lay on hands for ordination. For priests, it will not be possible for all the priests present to lay on hands. Guidance is given in the Bishops’ Pastoral Guidance for Phase 3.