

25th September 2020

Dear Father, Dear Deacon,

I do hope that you are all well in these rapidly shifting times.

I have just returned from some time away to be met by a number of changes to the government guidance relating to places of worship. I am sure you have seen them in the media but I have received a number of emails seeking clarification on some points so I thought it might be useful to highlight the main changes.

The most significant changes are in relation to the numbers permitted to attend what the government refers to as Life Cycle Ceremonies and also the Test and Trace App introduced on 24th September.

With regards Life Cycle Ceremonies, from 28th September the numbers that are allowed to attend funerals remain at 30 but weddings are reduced to 15. 'Venue workers' e.g. the presiding minister, are not included in this number.

For all other Life Cycle Ceremonies (Confirmation, First Holy Communion, Baptism) the Rule of Six applies. Only six people, including the infant at a baptism, may attend. What is not clear from the guidance is if this includes the presiding minister. I would suggest that until specifically told otherwise, it does not include the minister.

This number may only be exceeded if the Life Cycle Ceremony takes place within communal worship i.e. a weekday or Sunday Mass when the limit of the venue applies. However, groups of six attending should not mingle.

The government issued guidance on 18th September which details venues where it is compulsory for those attending to provide their contact details to support the Test & Trace process. If people refuse to provide their details, they will be denied entry. Places of worship were not included in this category however places of worship must have a system in place to collect contact details and those coming to services should be encouraged to provide their details. However, it is not compulsory to give details and those not prepared to provide their details should not be refused entry.

To assist the collection process the government introduced a new Test and Trace App on 24th September. Individuals can download this to a mobile device which then allows them to use a QR code to register their attendance at a particular place. Should someone receive a positive Covid test the App will be used to contact other attendees and advise them what to do. Whilst not compulsory for churches to use this system it is strongly recommended and obtaining a code is very easy and quick. It comes as a poster which is displayed inside the church.

Details of how to obtain a code may be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/create-coronavirus-qr-poster>

More comprehensive details of the Test and Trace scheme may be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/maintaining-records-of-staff-customers-and-visitors-to-support-nhs-test-and-trace#list-of-settings>

These full guidelines make it clear that those attending church should be encouraged to provide their contact details either via the App and QR code or by providing their contact detail in another

manner. "In England, you do not have to request details from people who check in with the official NHS QR poster, and venues should not ask them to do both."

I have also been asked questions about singing. The rule that prohibits congregational singing still applies. However, a group of up to six adults may sing during a service as long as what they sing does not encourage congregational singing i.e. singing hymns or well-known chants that the congregation may join in with.

If more than six adults sing the guidance states: "In all other cases, where the number of adult performers will be greater than 6, each group of up to 6 performers should ensure that they do not mix and that appropriate social distancing requirements are observed."

Groups of singers aged under 18 are not limited in number as long as the group is supervised.

All of the information regarding the safe use of places of worship is in the government guidance:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july>

I think the document it is very helpful, well set out and relatively easy to follow. I have no other source of information but I am happy to try and provide clarification if needed.

Finally, some questions have been raised with regards to the use of parish halls. From what I have read parish halls may be used for catechetical classes. The group may exceed 6 people as this falls under education which is not covered by the rule of six. It would also be in order for parish halls to be used as an overflow to the church for religious services as long as distancing and other rules that pertain to the church are applied.

However, for social and cultural events, coffee after Mass etc., the Rule of Six would apply. As social distancing is difficult to maintain at social gatherings and only such a small group is permitted, our recommendation would be that halls should not be used for social or cultural events for the time being.

With regards to use of the hall by external groups guidance may be sought from the property team at Bowen House: property@rcaos.org.uk

Writing this has made me realise what difficult and restricted times we are living in. None of us would willingly choose to limit parish life in this way. However, I console myself with the fact that despite the hurdles we have to jump, we are still able to provide the Sacraments that people are so eager to receive. "The Lord will provide".

If there is anything I have not covered or if you think I can help in any further way, please do get in touch.

With every prayer and fraternal good wish.

Canon Richard Hearn KCHS, VG
Dean of St George's Cathedral,
Moderator of the Curia