

Update on Covid Restrictions

You will have seen that the Government has confirmed that, from **Monday 14 September**, the number of people legally allowed to meet socially, both indoors and outdoors, will reduce from **thirty to six**. This will apply to gatherings in private homes and gardens, public outdoor spaces and venues such as pubs and restaurants.

The Prime Minister confirmed in his statement of 9th September¹ that places of worship will be able to stay open for communal worship - as is currently the case - and will be able to host numbers larger than six for communal worship. The capacity limit for each place of worship should be set by what is possible within COVID-secure social distancing guidelines for that building – as explained in the Places of Worship Guidance.²

Attending Mass and other Acts of Worship

The main change for places of worship is as follows: if you are attending with others, then the group you are attending with should not exceed more than six people. This group of six can be made up of people from outside your household, but strict social distancing must be maintained between members of different households at all times.

The Prime Minister was clear in stating that everyone should limit social contact as much as possible and minimise all interactions with those they do not live with. Therefore, when travelling to, entering and inside places of worship, people should observe strict social distancing from anyone not in their household - even if they are attending as a group of six.

The only exception to this new rule is where a single household (or support bubble) contains more than six people, but the same rules on social interaction with others outside their group should apply. No person who lives separately to this household or is not included in the support bubble is permitted to accompany this larger group. This replaces previous rules where groups could be larger than six people if they were made up of two households.

Attending other Sacramental Celebrations

What the government call “life cycle events” – celebrations such as weddings (including their receptions), funerals and other sacramental celebrations will continue to be allowed but are subject the current limit of 30 people. As above, whilst up to 30 people can attend the event, people attending these events must remain within their groups of six and observe strict social distancing between each separate group.

This has also been confirmed by Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in his Tweet of 9th September who stated: *Places of Worship Update: Places of worship remain open for communal prayer and services for above 6 people, with existing Covid-19 secure requirements continuing to apply. Weddings, wedding receptions, funerals and religious “life-cycle events” remain limited to 30 people.*

Implications for other aspects of Church Life

The key consideration for other aspects of church life is the minimising of contact between people (or households, or support bubbles). In terms of our church life, the “Rule of Six” would apply to all social events and activities that are outside of Acts of Worship apart from those listed below.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-press-conference-statement-9-september-2020>

² <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>

Catechetical activities such as sacramental preparation sessions are not considered as being affected by the Rule of Six, as these are formal Religious Education and Formation sessions. The guidance offered by local dioceses for good practice should be adhered to (for example having fixed groups of children and young people with a catechist) in all cases.

Choirs and music groups are also not considered to be restricted by this Rule as they come under the realms of the Performing Arts Guidance which recognises choirs and music groups during liturgies and their rehearsal periods as a performing art, and therefore are subject to that particular set guidance. This has not been changed in the light of the Prime Minister's statement.³

An Aide Memoire for Priests, Deacons and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

Priests, deacons and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should take particular care when visiting the sick in their parish and should follow the guidance published by the Bishops' Conference (updated 25th August 2020). They should not visit successive households in one session but should space home visits over a period of time, taking care with all aspects of hygiene between visits.

When deacons and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are assisting the priest during Holy Mass, please also be aware of the need for extra sanitisation of the hands because of the compulsory wearing of face coverings. When entering the Sanctuary to assist, remove the face covering, receive Holy Communion from the priest, replace the face covering and before touching anything else, sanitise your hands again. Key principles:

- The very last thing you should do before distributing Holy Communion, is to sanitise your hands.
- Avoid touching your face covering or face whilst distributing Holy Communion.
- If you come into contact with a communicant by accident, please sanitise your hands.
- Once you have returned your ciborium/paten, sanitise your hands again before returning to your seat.

Although these directions apply to deacons and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, priests should also be keenly aware of this.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas
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³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/performing-arts>