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### **Guidance on the re-opening of our Churches for individual prayer**

Dear brothers in the priesthood,

The doors of our churches have been closed since 23rd March 2020, following the clear instruction from the Government. All of us, clergy and laity, share a deep desire to re-open our churches as soon as the Government allows us to do so. Re-opening must, of course, happen in a safe manner, and it is likely to take place in stages. Each stage will be accompanied by guidance to ensure that this can happen safely and effectively.

These notes, prepared nationally and with detailed public health advice and scrutiny, comply with the principles established by the government. They are intended to assist parish priests to be ready to re-open their churches as soon as permission is granted. They focus on what is needed to open churches safely (i.e. providing the least possible risk of transmission of the virus) for private prayer as a first step. Please do not panic as you read these rather full and detailed notes. I fully realise that, initially, very few parishes will have the body of people able to and needed to follow these directives. I anticipate that only a few larger churches in each deanery area will initially be able to reopen for private prayer, and perhaps only for a few hours each day. I have, as you know, asked the Vicar Generals to speak with the Deans as to which parishes might be best able to open first for private prayer.

#### **Principles**

The principles established by government to enable safe re-opening of churches have been incorporated into this guidance:

- I. Protecting those at higher risk (e.g. the elderly, those extremely vulnerable and shielding or clinically vulnerable and accessing annual flu immunisation);
- II. Enhanced cleaning of premises – more regularly, and no sharing of items;
- III. Social distancing – including when using outdoor spaces;
- IV. Face coverings for reassurance;
- V. Hygiene (hand-washing) or hand sanitising facilities for all;
- VI. Managing children

#### **What is 'individual prayer'?**

Individual prayer within a place of worship is defined as a person or household entering the venue to pray on their own and not as part of a group, led prayer or communal act. They must be socially distanced from other individuals or households. Collective or communal prayer and regular scheduled services are not permitted at this time. This includes any ministers of religion or lay person leading devotions or prayer.

### **First Steps: Preparation so as to be able to re-open safely**

Even before churches can re-open, there are some important preparations that will need to be made which is why I am sending this letter out now. In order to be ready, Parish Priests need to ensure the fundamentals of infection control are in place (which will protect those who are vulnerable) by doing the following:

1. Assembling a team of stewards to ensure that the guidance in this document can safely be put into effect. The number of volunteers required will vary, depending on the size of churches, but priests will not be able to manage the re-opening of churches on their own. It is obviously important that those in the team should not be drawn from those instructed to shield themselves, nor, as a general rule, from groups considered more vulnerable to coronavirus.
2. Securing sufficient supplies of alcohol hand gel, cleaning materials (including gloves for those cleaning the benches, church, etc) and tape to mark appropriate distances on floors and to block off areas of seating. When buying supplies, it is important to ensure that hand gel with anti-viral properties is obtained; this should be at least 65% alcohol. Many hand sanitisers are only anti-bacterial and offer no protection against coronavirus. The Government advises that normal household disinfectant and detergents are suitable for cleaning. Tape can be purchased online (search for 'floor marking tape' on Church Marketplace, Amazon etc). **PLEASE NOTE:** as a diocese we intend to buy centrally what is needed (to ensure supply & save on costs) and then distribute and invoice accordingly to those churches that are gradually able to fulfil the conditions
3. Mark distances on the floor and block off pews/chairs to ensure adequate social distancing (2mtrs/6feet between each person) is maintained throughout the church. As an alternative to blocking off rows with tape, seating may be reconfigured if this is possible (eg., the removing of chairs or pews). Depending on the size of the church, it may be beneficial to use different areas of the church on different days to facilitate cleaning. When this is done, the maximum person capacity at any one time, under the social distancing regime, must be determined and this made clear in all parish communication, and especially to those seeking to enter the church, preferably by way of clear signage (see 5 below).
4. Removing from the church all printed materials that are not designed for a single use. This would include service books, hymn books, CTS pamphlets, appeal leaflets, etc.
5. Preparing appropriate signage, e.g., asking people to sanitise their hands on entry and exit, not to touch or physically venerate statues or relics, clear entrance and exit signs, maximum safe capacity etc.
6. Maintaining as much ventilation within the church space as possible; keeping doors open decreases transmission risk through touching but also allows a flow of fresh air into the church space. If the church has windows that can be opened, then please ensure that they are.

7. Ensure that all taps, toilets and other water storage devices are run well to flush the systems before anyone uses them, especially if the church has not been in use for some time.

#### **How is the COVID-19 virus spread?**

The Government guidance states that the spread of COVID-19 is most likely to happen when there is close contact (within 2 metres or less) with an infected person. It is likely that the risk increases the longer someone has close contact with an infected person. Respiratory secretions (droplets) containing the virus are likely to be the most important means of transmission; these are produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

#### **Opening and operating safely; hand hygiene, cleaning and social distancing**

The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has been working with our Public Health advisors, Public Health England and the Government, in order to provide clear directives for the safe opening of our churches in ways which minimise the risk of virus transmission. In response to the above understanding of virus transmission, the proposed directives are:

1. At least two stewards must be present in the church throughout the time it is open for prayer. The stewards must ensure that hand sanitisation occurs at entry and exit points, social distancing is maintained by people in the church and if a pre-determined capacity is reached, they prevent others from entering the church. (Through, for example, a "one in, one out" policy.) People with cold or flu-like symptoms should be asked not to enter.
2. Stewards themselves should practice good hand hygiene through either regular hand washing or the use of alcohol-based hand sanitiser. They should not eat or drink or touch their face unless they have immediately washed their hands beforehand and should maintain social distancing within the church. They should also ensure that any cuts or grazes on their hands are completely covered with waterproof dressings. They should not physically assist people, unless absolutely necessary in an emergency for first aid.<sup>1</sup>In this case there are some basic steps which stewards should be aware of:
  - a. Be aware of the risks to yourselves and others in helping someone.
  - b. Make sure you wash your hands and use an alcohol gel, before and after helping someone. Ensure that you do not cough or sneeze over someone when you are helping them.
  - c. Wear disposable gloves or cover hands when dealing with people and dispose of them securely.
  - d. Dispose of all waste from first aid safely in tied bags in bins.
  - e. Do not touch a wound with your bare hand.
  - f. Do not touch any part of a dressing that will come in contact with a wound.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on supporting people in emergency situations see the full government guidance at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-interim-guidance-for-first-responders/interim-guidance-for-first-responders-and-others-in-close-contact-with-symptomatic-people-with-potential-2019-ncov>

3. It would be an additional infection control measure if people could enter and leave the church via separate doors. If this is not possible, as will be the case in many of our churches, stewards should do all they can to ensure people keep an appropriate social distance while entering and leaving church (eg, by having an entrance line and an exit line).
4. Alcohol hand gel should be provided at the doors, with notices asking people to sanitise their hands as they enter and leave the church.
5. Places where people can sit or kneel in prayer should be 2metres/6feet apart from one another in all directions. Benches should be blocked off, or seats rearranged, to facilitate this social distancing. People who are part of the same household can sit together but those not from the same household should maintain social distancing while in church.
6. The church must be cleaned fully at least once a day, using appropriate cleaning products and paying particular attention to touch points (door handles, collection boxes, etc). Areas that are likely to be touched frequently (e.g., door handles) should be cleaned more often,<sup>2</sup>
  - a. Cleaning an area with normal household disinfectant or detergent (including on pews) will reduce the risk of passing the infection on to other people.
  - b. Those doing this work must wear disposable or washing-up gloves and aprons for cleaning. How these are disposed of or cleaned is important.
  - c. The cleaning method for surfaces and touchpoints should be by using a disposable cloth or disposable paper tissues. First, clean hard surfaces with detergent and water or detergent spray; **not** polish spray on its own. Pay particular attention to frequently touched areas and surfaces, such as bathrooms, grab-rails in corridors and stairwells and door handles. Anti-viral spray cleaner which does not harm wood and other fittings is available from suppliers.
  - d. Those doing this work must practice good hygiene: wash their hands regularly with soap and water for 20 seconds, **especially** after removing gloves, aprons and other protection used while cleaning.
7. Toilet facilities in churches should remain closed to prevent any risk of transmission of infection. If facilities for hand washing **only** can be provided, and these can be cleaned frequently, then these can be opened to allow people to wash their hands but **only** if liquid soap can be provided and air driers or disposable paper towels are used. Cloth towels should **not** be used.
8. Only printed materials intended to be taken away from the church by the user may be made available. Hymn books, missals, devotional materials etc which may be re-used should be completely removed from the church.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on cleaning and disinfection see the full government guidance at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>

9. Physical veneration of relics or objects such as statues, crucifixes and shrines is not permitted. There should be no holy water in church stoups. Care should be exercised when lighting candles on votive stands using existing candles as a source of ignition, not lighters, matches or tapers. For electric candle stands, clean the row of buttons frequently.

#### **Face Coverings**

Government has advised that cloth face coverings (and not surgical masks) could be worn for reassurance by people in enclosed areas but are not strictly necessary. Churches do not need to supply face coverings. People should not see their voluntary use as disrespectful to prayer or the sacred space.

#### **Children**

While children are unlikely to become very ill, they are capable of both being infected by the virus and of spreading it. Parents or guardians bringing children into a church should not be discouraged from doing so, but it will be important for parents to manage their children appropriately, particularly ensuring that they touch as few surfaces as possible for their own safety.

#### **Vulnerable people**

It remains a person's own choice to come to church to pray. Churches may wish to consider setting aside a section only for people who are more vulnerable to serious disease if infected, and clearly signposted as such, or otherwise having a designated time only for people who are more vulnerable and wish to pray privately.

#### **Private Prayer Only**

This advice concerns only the opening of churches for private prayer. Further detailed advice will be issued in due course when public worship is safe to re-commence. This advice cannot be followed for other activities that may take place on parish premises, such as groups that would meet in church halls, **because at present these must remain closed**. This is because group gatherings at the time of writing are not permitted by law, and social distancing cannot be monitored in an effective way with groups that meet socially or for other activities in our premises.

#### **The importance of these measures**

I'm very much aware that these measures may seem burdensome, or even a little daunting. They are however necessary, not least because if any churches are seen to be operating in a way that may increase the spread of the virus, there is a risk that stricter measures such as prohibition or enforced closure notices could be re-imposed by local authorities or even national administrations. It is our hope that, with priests and their parishioners working effectively together, we will be able to open some churches safely for private prayer, as a significant step towards the resumption of the celebration of Mass and the other sacraments.

#### **Risk Assessment document to be completed before a church may re-open**

The Government Task Force has indicated that a Risk Assessment Document must be completed before a church may re-open. So, if you think your parish is able to carry out these government measures and so re-open your church, **please do email your local Dean and copy in Catherine Scholes: [property.assistant@dioceseofnottingham.uk](mailto:property.assistant@dioceseofnottingham.uk) and your local Vicar General**, so that appropriate advice and support can be offered, and the ordering of the required supplies of materials can be done in good time

A small team of curial employees will be trained up to offer advice and practical support, if needed by any priests and their team of volunteers. As a diocese we will produce our own practical Risk Assessment document, based on the government guidance, which will be emailed to all churches seeking to reopen for private prayer. Please note that this document must be completed and returned to Catherine Scholes, and copied to your Dean and local Vicar General, and only then will permission be given to re-open a church.

With gratitude for your prayerful and encouraging witness during this time of lockdown,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Patrick". The plus sign is small and positioned to the left of the name. The name "Patrick" is written in a cursive, slightly slanted script.

Right Reverend Patrick McKinney  
Bishop of Nottingham