



EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE IRELAND

Reopening Guidelines for Churches

24th June 2020

EAI has no agenda or authority to enforce anything. We recognise that many denominations and churches, particularly those congregations with more personnel and resources, are perfectly capable of developing their own guidelines and action plans. However, many newer or smaller congregations do not have these resources or capabilities. Therefore, in a spirit of cooperation, we offer the following helpful guidelines.

We are using a simple 'Traffic Light' illustration to help churches get ready for reopening in-person services while meeting government and public health guidelines and reassuring church members that things are being done in a safe, orderly and considerate fashion.

RED

Denotes essential steps that all congregations should take. Failure to take such steps carries many risks. You may encounter legal difficulties, receive unwelcome attention from public authorities, negative publicity, a loss of reputation in your community, or even be responsible for a new spike of infections.

AMBER

Denotes precautions that may or may not be legally required, but are still strongly recommended. Following these measures will enhance your congregation's trust, and help maintain a good witness to the wider community.

GREEN

Denotes tips and ideas from churches across the nation that you may find helpful in negotiating the new normal.

We recognise that, from the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, scientific understanding of this virus, and the levels of threat to our society, have changed. These guidelines are suitable for the initial re-opening phase of church life. We do not anticipate them remaining the same forever, but envisage changes in line with general public health advice.

We want to thank the following for their assistance and cooperation in developing these guidelines:

Christian Churches Ireland (CCI), Plumblin, Church of God, Betania Romanian Pentecostal Church, Dun Laoghaire Evangelical Church, Irish Council of Churches, Liberty Church.

If you have any questions, please contact nick@evangelical.ie. You can also view these guidelines, and any updates we make to them, on our website at <https://evangelical.ie/church-reopening-guidelines>.

RED

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NUMERICAL LIMITS

At present the government has imposed a maximum attendance of 50 at each indoor service. While there are ongoing negotiations on this point, we must plan in accordance with the current limit while having an alternative plan to implement if this stipulation changes.

SYMPTOMS

Anyone with cold or flu symptoms should be discouraged from attending church services. Also, have a plan of action if anyone becomes unwell during a service.

DISTANCING

We must practice physical distancing of 2 metres. (This distance may change at some point, but initially 2 metres is the figure for which we must plan). Obviously households can be seated together, but each household unit should be seated 2 meters distant, in all directions, from every other family unit.

OUTSIDE

Physical distancing begins before people come through the doors. Sanitisation procedures mean the rate of flow as people enter and exit will be slower than normal. We are responsible to ensure that people queuing to enter church observe a 2-metre distance.

PHYSICAL CONTACT

Physical distancing means strongly discouraging hugs and handshakes.

SIGNAGE

Clear signage is essential.

SANITISATION

We must provide adequate sanitiser stations, both for entering and exiting the building. Also, have sufficient supplies of tissues available, as well as pedal-operated covered bins for disposal of tissues.

REFRESHMENTS

For the initial few weeks, avoid serving tea and coffee or any type of refreshments. Such a service multiplies the risk of transmitting infection, and you want to discourage people from mingling or lingering in an enclosed indoor space after the service finishes.

AMBER

Precautions that may or may not be legally required, but are still strongly recommended. Following these measures will enhance your congregation's trust, and help maintain a good witness to the wider community

POLICY

It would be advisable to have a simply safety policy which is clearly communicated to church membership. The more you communicate, the more confidence they will have in you.

TRACK & TRACE

It is highly advised to have a system for recording attendance at services (subject, of course, to GDPR compliance). If anyone who has attended a church service subsequently tests positive for Covid-19, you may expect the HSE to contact you seeking the names and contacts of everyone else who was in that service.

TOILETS

Give careful consideration to toilets as potential hotspots for infection opportunities. If you decide to have them open to everyone, then consider having an attendant on constant duty to wipe down services after each person uses the facilities.

CLEANING

Coronavirus can survive for 72 hours on surfaces. If you are only having one weekly event in the church, deep cleaning is therefore not necessary. However, if you are planning midweek events, or multiple services, then deep cleaning is strongly advised between events.

ONE-WAY SYSTEM

If your building has more than one entrance/exit then we advise that you operate a one-way system.

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

The scientific advice is still not clear on children spreading infection, and for many churches it will be extremely difficult to implement physical distancing due to staffing and space constraints. Develop and communicate a plan for children well in advance.

MASKS

Unless mandated by government, most churches will not insist on masks being worn. But it is advisable to have a supply available if requested.

FINANCIAL OFFERINGS

Passing an offering plate along rows represents an unacceptable risk. It is advised to develop a means for people to give that maintains 2 metre distancing and avoids multiple people touching the same surfaces.

COMMUNION

If you do decide to celebrate communion in the first few weeks of re-opening, do so in a way that is safe.
Under no circumstances should celebrants share a common cup.
Consider ordering pre-packaged cups and wafers.

EXITING

Upon leaving the building, it is advised to do so in a planned and orderly manner that maintains the 2-metre distancing – e.g. row by row, beginning with those nearest the exit.

GREEN

Tips and ideas from churches across the nation that you may find helpful in negotiating the new normal

THERMOMETERS

Consider using pistol-style thermometers as people are arriving. While not fool-proof, given that people may be asymptomatic yet still infectious, it will give people a greater sense of security.

TOILETS CLOSED

Increased multiple services may well necessitate a shorter service. If so, consider keeping toilets closed. (Obviously can be opened on request in cases of urgency!)

MAÎTRE D

Seating different sized groups quickly and safely could become a logistical nightmare. Consider creating a new ministry where someone oversees that process, similar to a Maître D' at a restaurant.

PLASTIC SEATING

If deep cleaning between multiple services. Consider replacing fabric seating with wipeable vinyl seats.

SINGING

There is scientific evidence to indicate that singing releases moisture droplets in a similar way to sneezing. These can remain in the air in an indoor space. Consider keeping services shorter (particularly if doing multiple services). Also, consider having your singing at the end of the service so people will sit in that environment for a shorter period of time.

SMARTEN UP THE FACILITIES

A lick of paint on the walls, or even some new carpet, will increase people's confidence to return by making the place look and smell clean. Also, some nice changes to the building will help people feel that not all the changes in the way we worship are negative.

TRACK & TRACE

To assist with Tracking and Tracing in case an attendee subsequently tests positive, consider taking a photograph of each congregation to record who is sitting close to anyone else.

PRAYER MINISTRY

Initially, consider using prayer request cards rather than having people standing in 'prayer lines' or laying on hands in prayer.

ONLINE BOOKING

Requiring attendees to register online in advance will assist tracking and tracing, while also ensuring that you don't exceed your capacity or numerical limit. It would seem sensible to limit congregants (except those serving in a ministry) to just one service.

SPECIAL SERVICE FOR VULNERABLE WORSHIPPERS

If you are holding multiple services, consider reserving one of them for vulnerable people such as the elderly or those with certain medical conditions. Consider banning children and making masks compulsory for this particular service.

FINANCIAL OFFERINGS

Some churches are planning to place offering boxes by the exits. Others plan to have a one-way system by which worshippers can walk to the front, place their offering in a receptacle, and collect pre-packaged communion elements.

CLUTTER & NOTICES

Remove all literature and merchandise from the premises. Removal all non-essential printed notices or notice boards to prevent lingering in foyers.

FLUSH WATER SYSTEM

If your building has been empty for several weeks, let your taps run for 20 minutes to minimise bacterial risks such as Legionnaires Disease.

CHILDREN

If you decide not to have children's classes, consider providing them with a welcome pack containing colouring pencils etc. to keep them occupied during the service.

PERSONAL BELONGINGS

Remind attendees to keep their coats and personal belongings with them, particularly if you are operating a one-way system for entering and exiting.

VIDEO WALK-THROUGH

It will help your congregation if you can prepare a walk-through video showing them what to expect when they arrive for a service. This will reassure them that you are taking necessary precautions. Distribute this video as widely as possible. Consider incorporating it into your online services.

UNKNOWN FACTORS TO BE KEPT IN MIND

These guidelines are prepared on the basis of the information we have now. It is entirely possible that the government or HSE will come up with new requirements that will be imposed on very short notice. So have an action plan in mind for every eventuality!

1. It is possible that face masks may be made mandatory in gatherings of a certain size.
2. The 2-metre distancing rule may be decreased.
3. There are ongoing discussions at government level as to whether the 50-person limit will be increased or removed altogether.
4. In some other jurisdictions singing has been prohibited or limited in public indoor spaces.
5. Some countries have imposed a time limit on services.
6. If you do not own or permanently lease your building, check that the landlord is going to permit you to keep meeting there and under what conditions. For example, some hotels, schools or community centres are changing their rental policies.

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24th June 2020

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