

Coronavirus update – Moving to Step 4 (19th July 2021)

On 19th July, most coronavirus legislation was removed. The new guidance from the Government places significantly more emphasis on “personal and corporate responsibility of individuals and organisations.” When it comes to our responsibility as a church, Step 4 brings some major changes, especially in the areas of face coverings, singing, test and trace, and children’s/youth work.

The Church of England’s updated guidelines recognise that:

“Within the Church we believe that everyone is known and loved individually by God and that as many members within one body we are called to be responsible to and for one another, respecting the more vulnerable whose suffering is our suffering (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). The move to step 4 means we are being asked to take even more personal responsibility around coronavirus than when we were compelled to adhere to Government restrictions.”

“Everyone has a different set of criteria by which they judge whether they feel safe in different situations. For many people, the relaxation of restrictions is a source of significant anxiety. This could include members of clergy, lay leaders, PCC members, members of congregations and of our wider communities, and care should be taken not to make assumptions about how someone else is feeling about moving to Step 4.”

We are reminded that as a body we need “to listen to the voices of the vulnerable” and to consider “where their fears and concerns lie.”

A way forward

As a staff team we recognise not only that there is a wide spectrum of opinion as to what we should do, but also that the removal of all legislation means that we can no longer insist on any course of action. Whilst this might feel unsettling and challenging, it is also a wonderful opportunity for each of us to think through how we might best seek to serve the needs of others. It may be helpful to have some passages in mind as we consider the following questions:

Love one another

(John 13:34,35)

Bear with one another

(Colossians 3:13)

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

(Ephesians 4:29)

Will there be a need to book?

Our last services which will require booking will be on Sunday 25th July, as there is no longer a legal limit on numbers attending. The government is still encouraging people to 'check in' at venues to support NHS Test and Trace, and we will continue to display QR codes at the church entrances to enable this.

Can I sit anywhere?

We will aim to keep the layout as it has been during lockdown, so that families can sit together. Other seats will be free for all. However, it is worth asking anyone whether they would value some form of social distancing before sitting down. We must feel able to ask – and able to answer that we would like more space if we need it.

We will seek to ensure that the building is cleaned regularly and is well ventilated.

Do I have to wear a mask?

You do not have to wear a mask, but we recognise that many will still want to do so, and that the government 'expects and recommends' face coverings in some situations. We must all be sensitive to one another's needs and feelings – and with love and support, recognise the needs of others. We should also assume that those who choose to act differently from us are not doing so out of selfishness or fear, but out of genuine love for God and for their neighbour.

Can I sing?

Yes – there are no longer any official restrictions on singing or musical instruments. As we sing we need to ensure that we recognise those for whom singing increases anxiety. Some may prefer to wear a mask, others may prefer to sit in a socially-distanced way. As each person makes a personal choice, we all need to be sensitive to, and supportive of, one another.

What about the Lord's Supper?

At St Leonard's we have missed out on sharing Holy Communion for well over a year due to the pandemic. While the Church of England has made provisions for congregants to receive only the bread, and more recently for the minister to dip a wafer into the wine, it is our conviction from reading the Bible that Jesus instituted a meal to be shared by everyone in both kinds, *eating* the bread and *drinking* the wine. This is now possible once more: we will return to sharing a common cup, the surface of which will be cleaned carefully between communicants. We recognise the great sensitivities in this area and want to emphasise the Church of England's guidance on the matter:

"Where either ministers or members of congregations have concerns about participating in a service of Holy Communion, it is important that no pressure is placed on priests to preside at Holy Communion or on parishioners to receive the Sacrament."

Communion services will begin again in August.

Will I need to sanitise my hands on arrival?

The hand sanitisers will remain in place for anyone who would like to use them.

Will the service be live-streamed?

Streaming of services will continue and will remain under review, so that we can both encourage attendance and make access to the services available.

Will there be coffee after the service?

Whilst this is now possible, we do not have enough volunteers to offer this at present. If you are able to help in this area, please contact the church office.

Will we review our plans?

The staff team will review everything at the end of August or the beginning of September.

How are decisions made?

The updated guidance states that *“the responsibility for making decisions about how to proceed lies with the incumbent.”* However, this document is a collaborative effort, the result of discussions among the staff team, and has been shared with the PCC for information. We will continue to communicate any future plans and decisions as they develop.

And finally . . .

It has been wonderful to see the love and fellowship of the church family over the last year or so, often in challenging and testing times. Now that we are coming out of lockdown, it is a great privilege to have this opportunity to manifest a Christ-commending godliness. There will be ongoing challenges, but we know ‘that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be confirmed to the likeness of his Son . . .’ (Romans 8:28,29)