

Dear friends

The Task Group have thought it might be useful to send an update as we start this new academic year and as people (hopefully) continue to return to regular in person worship across the Diocese.

But first and foremost, we wanted to say thank you. Thank you for all the sharing of good practice over the last few months; for all the good questions which help us know what information would be useful to you; and for all the helpful comments regarding tone and direction of these briefings. This has all helped us in distributing suggestions and examples which have made our churches and organisations safer places to be during the pandemic and beyond.

We are now in a very different place to where we were when we started these (then daily) briefings, and we praise God for that. However, there is a similar feeling of trepidation mixed within the celebration as we see infection numbers continue to rise and presume the exponential rise in cases seen when schools returned in Scotland may well happen here over the coming weeks.

For this reason, the focus of our briefing this week is to mirror the Director of Public Health for Lancashire's call for us all to maintain some of the **good habits** we have all developed over the course of the last 18 months. This is even more important in the absence of any official restrictions and particularly as studies have shown us that clarity of approach is incredibly important in making people feel comfortable as they enter a building.

Your wise and judicious decision making is once more being relied upon and blanket approaches are no longer possible as each decision must reflect local circumstances. In light of this we hope you will find the following useful:

Masks and face coverings

These are no longer mandated in England and people should be free to attend services without a face covering. The government advice remains that it "expects and recommends" that face coverings are worn in crowded areas, enclosed spaces or in instances where social distancing is not possible. A number of places have changed signage to read that "people should feel free to wear face coverings" or similar.

Some churches still hold to the wearing of face coverings as a clear preference for all attending worship, others only ask for them to be worn whilst singing as a congregation. Deciding what your policy will be going forwards with the PCC, with a time to review the approach, may be wise.

Cleaning and hand hygiene

We have all become used to the application of alcohol-based hand gel as we enter shops and businesses, and church buildings are no different. Maintaining good hand hygiene at certain contact points is still important. Entry to the church; before receiving communion; before placing money in the offering plate, and so on.

If the peace is being shared with contact once more it will be a good idea to encourage the use of hand gel before and after skin to skin contact.

[Current advice](#) from the Church of England (as of 1/9/21) is that pews should be 'cleaned regularly'. Once more there must be interpretation within the parish as to what these intervals of cleaning will look like - taking into account frequency of services, numbers attending and time in between people sitting at each pew etc.

We understand that quite a few churches have returned to safely distributing hymn books, bibles and service booklets or have them available in pews. Please consider how this might happen in your setting and, again, review processes periodically.

Holy Communion

Bishop Julian has given his support for Communion in both kinds to be received once more. Our sense is that not all churches, by any means of measuring, have chosen to return to this practice and many still receive in one kind only.

If returning to the Common Cup we have been informed of a number of different practices which are being deployed to help with the sanitising of the chalice in between people receiving. Please consider your own church's response to this matter, remembering both the practical and theological implications of any approach.

As we have suggested elsewhere, consider whether you will review the decision periodically so that it best reflects the circumstances.

Vaccination

Both official and independently collected data (from a number of different studies which can be found [here](#)) shows that those who are fully vaccinated experience infection rates three times lower than those who have not received the vaccine. Similarly, those who are vaccinated experience milder symptoms and are much less likely to attend hospital, and there is 200 times higher chance of developing a life threatening illness such as a blood clot from the virus itself than from the vaccine (click [here](#) for the BMJ briefing on this study, including the peer review).

It is not for us to apply pressure on those not yet vaccinated to get the jab. However, it is often for reasons of practicality and ease of access that some of our most vulnerable communities have lower levels of uptake than others. Churches may be able to assist those who wish to receive the vaccine in doing so.

Long covid

We have become more and more aware of the grave impact of what has become known as Long Covid on people in our diocese. If you are a church leader or office holder (either lay or ordained) and are suffering from long term conditions linked to coronavirus we would be very keen to hear from you and hear how we can better support you. Please contact the coronavirus email address found below, which only Bishop Philip and the Bishop's Chaplain, Sam Cheesman access, and be assured of anonymity if you wish it.

Each church may wish to consider how they can support people in this position in their parishes.

You will have noticed the continued absence of hard and fast rules and the need for decisions to be made locally; we are aware of the added pressure this brings at all levels of church leadership. Involving all lay and ordained leaders in some of this decision making will be important, as will an intentional review process so that actions reflect the realities of the situation as things develop.

As ever, if you have any questions which cannot be answered from our website please do contact us using coronavirus@blackburn.anglican.org

Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy
in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.

Yours,
Coronavirus Task Group