

Risk assessment and opening plan for Holy Innocents church

Introduction

Government guidance allows churches to open for communal worship in all Tiers of pandemic restriction – including Tier 4 when most other group gatherings are not allowed. Churches are advised to develop their own plans to open safely.

This plan has been developed by the church Standing Committee and has been updated in January 2021 to take account of discussions around the new, more contagious variant of the virus. Our aims in this process are:

1. We are responsible for the safety of those who enter our church, and this is too important to defer wholly to higher authorities. We want to think through the issues carefully and have our own plan, more detailed and specific to our context.
2. We want folks to be comfortable rather than just safe, to feel confident to worship and pray without fear. For this, it has helped that many of those people have been involved in developing our plan for re-opening, with time to discuss the options and input into the decisions we have made.
3. We want to do this in a way which reflects our ethos and values – as we have done so successfully in creating audio services during lock-down. We are trying to keep things as simple and natural as possible, while reducing risk.

This note looks primarily at Sunday worship. There is an appendix at the end which explains how we have extended this to apply to weekday Eucharists.

The risks

So how do we open up well? We must reduce to an acceptable minimum the risk of infection. We understand this risk arises in 3 ways:

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| Touch | Someone touches an object or surface, if they have virus on their person it may transfer, and then be transferred again when another person touches that object. Virus on surfaces dies within 72 hours; |
| Projection | Virus is contained in micro-droplets expelled on the breath and more strongly projected in sneezing, coughing and also singing; |
| Circulation | Virus-carrying droplets linger in the air and can infect people even if more than 2 metres away, depending on how air is circulating in the space. |

In all 3, the quantity of virus ingested must exceed a threshold (which may vary by individual). Quantities are higher on surfaces and in sneezes, lower in circulating air, where the time spent in that air is therefore a factor.

Evidence about transmission of the new variant of the virus is still being gathered, but it seems likely that the threshold is lower – so very small quantities which before would not have given rise to infection seem to be a risk with the new variant.

Congregation members

So how do we minimise that risk? We have looked at this by following the journey of each participant in the service. First for a member of the congregation.

On arrival, the outer and inner double doors will be open. They walk in without the need to touch anything. Hand sanitiser will be offered on arrival and also as an option before

receiving communion – in a way which does not involve people repeatedly handling the same bottle or device.

In church, we have reduced the number of chairs and spaced them out. Using an upper limit on numbers of 55, we can accommodate everyone while households remain 2 metres apart. People will be directed as needed (especially newcomers). We don't think designated seats will be necessary.

We will provide a service leaflet for each person. These will be printed off and folded earlier in the week and then placed on the chairs, spaced out by 2 metres. We have also prepared a separate sheet with safety guidance in English and Farsi, as well as posters on the way in. Guidance will also be published on the website and circulated in advance by email and WhatsApp so that as many people as possible are briefed before they arrive.

Two sides-people only, one at the door and one directing people to their seats, will remain distanced from each other and from those arriving. We have decided that tapes on the floor are not needed.

We now require all people attending to wear a mask while they are in the building. You will need to lower your mask to receive the communion wafer but please replace it immediately, taking care that it covers your nose. If possible please bring a washable cloth mask as these typically offer better protection. Disposable masks will also be available at the door.

Government advises against public singing, so we will not need hymn books. The organ may be played. The rest of our music will be recorded by our musicians and choir members, and played through the sound system.

The Peace will be non-contact: the sanctuary party will remain in their places and the congregation will be asked to do the same, turning and waving as they wish.

Communion is discussed below. It will remain an option not to receive (as some have done, for example when immune-suppressed). Those in this position are still included in our Eucharist.

The usual collection would not work. We propose to encourage those who can to give by bank transfer but also put out a retiring plate: the contents can then be isolated for 72 hours in the safe.

At the end of the service, both the main and back doors will be held open for people to leave gradually rather than all at once. Please move directly out of the building and do not hold conversations until you are outside. There will be no refreshments in this first phase of opening up, so no use of the Apse room.

Toilets: We are providing additional washing and hand-sanitising facilities and offering anti-viral wipes, whilst making it clear that use of the toilets will carry additional risk.

On this basis then (communion aside) it may be possible for someone to arrive, sit down, participate, get up and leave without touching anything other than their chair and leaflet. As to risk of projection, 2 metre distancing (plus masks if worn) should limit the risk.

On circulated air, we have the benefit of a large volume of air and high ceiling. We will open the South West door and keep both rear doors fully open to aid circulation, weather permitting. There are openable windows in the roof, but this would require hiring in a cherry picker, which we don't think is necessary.

Finally, we will be making clear that we cannot advise those who are shielding to deviate from Government advice.

The service will be streamed, accessible from the church website, and recorded so it can also be watched later. We encourage everyone to think carefully as to whether they wish to take the risk of attending in person or would prefer to participate from home.

Sanctuary party and others serving

We will keep the procession as simple as possible, mostly just President and MC, plus thurifer. Candles and gospel will be placed symbolically before the service starts.

Readers and intercessors will be invited to use the small lectern (avoiding the need for a handrail), where possible bringing up their own materials so no touch is involved.

Incense: This may have some anti-viral benefits, so it's likely to be used more than usual. The thurifer will cense on his own rather than handing back and forth to the president.

The President and the Eucharist

The president will sit in his/her usual chair. The collect can be said in the usual way (long vision permitting!)

The preacher will use the bird lectern, being the only person to do so and reading the gospel from there.

Offertory procession: This will also be dispensed with for now. The elements will have been prepared the week before and placed on the side table in closed or covered receptacles, hence isolated for the required 72 hours before use.

The priest and MC will wash hands before the service. The priest will hand-sanitise immediately before the distribution. Individual wafers to be shared will remain covered until the moment of distribution – to prevent the priest breathing directly over them. The wine and a separate large wafer for the fraction will be elevated during the Eucharistic prayer – and then consumed by the celebrant alone.

Distribution (in one kind): this is perhaps the moment of greatest risk, but we want if possible for it to be comfortable and natural. We have implemented what we think is the safest option (implemented by churches in Germany): The priest will remain static and wearing a mask. His/her face will be behind a Perspex screen while still allowing hands to distribute below, people come up individually and receive.

We would like to return to receiving in the round when we can, probably distanced (perhaps 6-10 at a time), with the priest circulating and perhaps wearing mask and visor, but at the moment we think this is a less safe option.

The priest will drop the wafer into the hands of the communicant, using tongs, so that the wafer only comes into contact with the recipient.

Ablutions will be done in the normal way, followed by refilling the ciborium for the following week: We are fortunate in having a full week between services for virus to degrade.

We will also consult with the Romanians about their use on a Sunday afternoon – it would seem fair to open the church for them as well, though we have a duty of care and will need to review their plans. Other weekday use of the building (apart from our opening for private prayer) will not be resuming just yet.

Weekday Eucharists

Following on from our re-opening for Sunday worship, and with the benefit of what we have learned from two Sundays together, we now propose to open during the week, on a Monday at noon and a Thursday evening at 7:30pm.

We propose to follow the same measures as we have developed for Sunday. Whereas in the past weekday Eucharists have been held in the Lady Chapel, under this scheme they will be conducted around the main altar, with 2 metre distancing, doors open as described above. We would expect between 6 and 12 people, so they would likely sit around the front rows of the current seating. The Eucharist would be shared in one kind, using screen and tongs (as described above). We have enough hardware to set this up completely separately from the Sunday. Hence where the vessels and elements for this coming Sunday were prepared and set aside after the service last Sunday, isolated for a week, we will do the same on a Monday and Thursday, allowing 3 days minimum between uses.

There is no bespoke leaflet for weekday Eucharists. Standard service guides on card are used by some participants, others follow from memory. These will be kept unused from week to week. The readings for each week are printed off and used by the two readers. These will be printed off at least 72 hours before and put to one side.