

Guidelines for gathering for adult ministry

As lockdown requirements ease, congregations will be carefully contemplating their autumn/winter programme of work to take place through the week among adults.

We continue to live and minister in challenging and rapidly changing circumstances, so it is crucial to follow and implement the most current advice and guidance provided by government, statutory agencies, your insurers and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

A previous document issued on 12 June 2020 entitled, *Getting ready to gather again and the Resumption of congregational activities checklist* which accompanies it, offers general guidelines for resuming any church activities. The fuller process outlined there should continue to be followed and it remains important to note that it is the responsibility of kirk session to decide if and when any activity can commence.

THINKING AGAIN ABOUT WHAT WE DO AND HOW

With the further passage of time, the dawn of what we usually consider a 'new church year' and in the context of a continually developing situation, it may be useful to think a little more about options of what might and might not be possible and practical in ministry and mission among adults.

The following guidelines offer a summary of basic considerations and requirements necessary at time of writing to ensure good judgement is exercised, the highest standards of hygiene are observed and the requirements of social distancing are maintained so that congregations act responsibly during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Some ideas about simplifying programming are also offered so that core aspects of adult ministry in this new church year can continue, perhaps albeit organised and arranged in different ways.

Each congregation's and individual organisation's circumstances will be different and they will come to a variety of decisions about what activities to recommence and how quickly. That should be expected and is entirely appropriate.

SETTING UP TO MEET

If the kirk session decides that a programme of ministry is to commence the following basic considerations and necessary provisions should be carefully pondered before beginning.

If other providers of adult activities not directly under the authority of kirk session are to use church premises, remember that the same provisions, arrangements, regulations and guidelines apply and care should be taken that they are informed and agree to operate accordingly.

- Have you considered that managing a programme will require much more effort, preparation and allowing more time for basic things like setting up, facilitating safe arrival and departure, hand washing and cleaning of rooms after/before the next group uses them?
- Can you ensure that the number of people expected can be accommodated in a suitable space available to comply with social distancing requirements and any limitations on group size meeting either indoors or outdoors?
- Can you ensure people from different households observe appropriate social distancing at all times? At present this is two metres between each person or household.
- Those who are speaking, leading praise, group work or giving instructions should be spaced at extra distance of four metres from others in attendance to avoid projecting water droplets and potentially spreading the virus.
- As in all other areas of life, the wearing of face coverings is encouraged and recommended for those aged 13 and over while on church premises.
- By ensuring 4 metres social distancing between those speaking, leading praise, group work or giving instructions and others in attendance, those making such contributions do not need to wear face coverings while doing so, but should do so at other times during the gathering and while on church premises. Care should be taken in the use of microphones and other audio-visual equipment. Microphones should not be passed from one person to another. Likewise, the use of lectern/podium should ideally be restricted to one person per gathering unless cleaning takes place between uses.
- Those attending should be encouraged to bring their own face covering, but it will be wise to also have a supply available at all events and activities.
- Leaders should make those attending aware that face coverings are recommended and encouraged in all PCI activities. Those exempted are those under 13 years of age or with an underlying medical condition that means wearing a face covering is not possible.
- All books and equipment should be removed from any area being used – this includes Bibles and hymnbooks.
- Provide a ready supply of hand sanitiser for all in attendance and a bin for tissues and other waste.
- If meeting indoors, some windows should be safely kept open for ventilation.



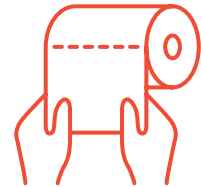
Can you ensure that the number of people expected can be accommodated in a suitable space available to comply with social distancing requirements and any limitations on group size meeting either indoors or outdoors?

ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE

- Ensure social distancing is observed in areas in which people are gathering on arrival or departure.
- Allow time for all involved to sanitise or wash their hands on arrival and leaving the session.

TOILETS

- If you choose to close toilets or limit the number available, ensure those attending are made aware of this in advance.
- If toilets are open, provide an adequate supply of warm water, soap and hand sanitiser.
- It will be advisable to have a process for regularly checking, and if necessary cleaning, toilets during the period activities are ongoing.



PROGRAMME

- You will not be able to do everything the way you usually do it in your normal programme and will need to be creative in thinking about what might and might not happen as usual due to necessary restrictions.
- As in worship services singing may be led by one or two at 4m distance from the group. All others present will be asked to wear face masks. Singing by the group members is possible with masks but will of necessity be softer and quieter.
- Those attending must bring their own Bibles or other material for use during sessions.
- If using printed material, such as Bible study guides, you must provide individual copies for each person which they will take home and bring with them every time you meet if necessary. You must not distribute such material to groups, collecting it in again at the end of the session for distribution at the next one.
- You cannot pre-prepare craft at home and any activity-based learning set should be able to be completed by people unaided by an instructor.
- No activity should infringe on maintaining necessary social distancing or ongoing limitations on group size meeting either indoors or outdoors.
- Nothing should be passed around for group use, including a collection plate or sports equipment e.g. shared indoor bowling equipment. In Bowls, and in line with recommendations from bowling associations, the jack should be placed by one person throughout i.e. not handled by lots of people and not thrown. The same person should be the only person who places the small mat that bowlers bowl from. Others should not touch it. Bowlers should just lift their own bowls not those belonging to others.
- You must not use kitchens or serve food or drink.
- If anyone attending sneezes or coughs they must immediately safely dispose of tissues and wash their hands.

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CLEANING

- If the room you are using will be in use again within 72 hours, you will need to wipe down all chairs, tables, equipment used and surfaces immediately after the session.

TRANSPORT

- The use of a church minibus, or even a member's car to transport others from a different household, presents significant issues regarding social distancing and hygiene and should not be your practice at this time.
- It will be advisable for activities to take place locally, so avoiding the need for transport to and from events.



COMMUNICATING WITH MEMBERS

- Prepare members for resuming any activities by informing them of arrangements and that the cooperation of everyone is required so as to ensure a safe environment in which to meet.
- It must be made clear that any person displaying any of the symptoms of COVID-19, or who have been in close contact with anyone who has displayed symptoms, should not attend under any circumstances.

BEGINNING AGAIN IN NEW WAYS

Every organisation is different in terms of its routines, activities, look and feel. Some will know their usual rhythms more interrupted by present circumstances than others. Some may not be able to meet at all for now.

SAFELY AND SMOOTHLY NAVIGATING THE CHURCH WEEK

If a room is vacant for 72 hours after use, deeper cleaning is not required. To facilitate this it may mean that your church halls cannot be used every evening as before. Instead, organisations that were used to meeting every week may have to reschedule to meet fortnightly, on a different night, or in a different room. In this way, more of your church life will be able to resume, albeit with less regularity than usual. So, more than ever, it is necessary not only to think of the interests of your own organisation or activity, but to work at coordinating carefully with others, keeping their needs and safety in view as well as your own.

BUILDING GRADUALLY

As a general rule, it will be wise to start small and build bigger. Go for quality over quantity. Don't start what you might not be able to sustain. Less may turn out to be more in terms of ongoing impact and effectiveness.

Do not be discouraged as you do this. Instead take permission to build a different programme which can unfold gradually as circumstances allow and as you learn as you go along. Some things will work, others will not. New things will occur to you as you experiment. Above all, feel free of the pressure of trying to operate your group as normal in this period. These are unprecedented times calling for a different approach.

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CHANGING ROOMS

At present unnecessary gatherings in private homes are generally discouraged, numbers allowed to meet from different households restricted and constantly under review with possible further reduction. Consequently, home Bible study or discipleship groups in member's houses are not recommended or practicable. This need not mean that small groups cannot meet. Why not consider moving them to church premises to meet socially distanced on a particular night in larger hall or separate rooms throughout the building, or on different days and times throughout the week?

The recently produced Prism Bible study material aimed at helping members reflect together on what God has been teaching them as individuals and a congregation during the period of the pandemic and lockdown may prove useful at this time.

COMBINING MINISTRY EMPHASES

To reduce the demand on available space in your building while deep cleaning is required, or to take best advantage of the 72 hour rule, it might be advantageous to combine what are usually two separate gatherings into one meeting e.g. midweek Bible study and weekly prayer time. This may also help with crafting programming for an evening as it may be that some elements of your usual programme at either or both gatherings may not be able to happen due to some of the restrictions outlined above.

MEASURING IMPACT

Don't be overly focused on numbers regularly attending. These may fluctuate for all sorts of reasons beyond your control, but be sure to invest in keeping contact with those who may not be able to attend due to present circumstances.

Not all of those who usually attend may feel able to do so due to underlying health conditions or other pastoral issues. Do try to find ways to support them in these days when they may feel especially isolated. Similarly, present circumstances may mean many members carrying additional responsibilities in everyday life know familiar routines and availability disrupted, impacting on their ability to attend activities as normal. This is another reason why less may turn out to be more and combining meetings may actually facilitate overall ministry impact in this season.

DIGITAL AND DISTANCED

We have discovered digital ministry offers a different way of being in touch, as necessity became the mother of invention over the last few months. So, it may be helpful to think in terms of a blended programme of physical gatherings and other ways of keeping contact.

In between meetings it may be possible to distribute some material on social media, meet by Zoom to pray, or to visit some of your group while continuing to observe regulations about social distancing and visiting indoors.

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WE MUST STOP MEETING LIKE THIS

It may be that some long standing congregational activities are just unable to resume for all sorts of reasons. If so, do not despair, Instead think carefully about what those gatherings aimed to achieve. Ask yourself, might there be a different way of achieving that same end? Might this be a time to trial doing so, remaining open to God's leading as to what he wants to happen in the future?

For example, an existing group finds it can no longer regularly meet together. Up until now it has been an important means of providing a mixture of fellowship, pastoral care, prayer and reflection on Scriptures for those who attended. Might leaders now visit those who attended in their own homes on a rota basis to offer care and prayer and to share Scripture instead? In doing so, might they be meeting the same need by bringing those crucial ministry elements to others when it is not possible or practical to be bringing them to a meeting? Could these home visits be supplemented by arranging a less regular socially distanced gathering which is easier to organise in present circumstances? In doing so, might a new model of ministry emerge for the future?

PLANNING TO SEE GOD IN THE MIDST OF IT ALL

Finally, remember that God goes with you and ahead of you as you set out on this next phase of your church life. He was with us in the confinement of lockdown. He will be with us in the refinement of our programme over the next few months. He will have taught us a lot about the future alignment of what we do and how we do it when coronavirus is a thing of the past.