

## House of Bishops Guidance Regarding Access to Church Buildings

This remains a seriously demanding and challenging time for everyone and I want to thank you again for your continued effective response to the coronavirus pandemic. So much amazing work is going on, supporting the vulnerable and isolated people in your communities and ensuring that worship and mission can continue and indeed thrive in many unexpected ways whilst our church buildings are closed.

You may be aware by now that the House of Bishops recently outlined guidance on a phased approach to revising access to our church buildings. They agreed that the timing of when to implement the revised advice on ministers or lay leaders praying and streaming from their church buildings should be made by individual Diocesan Bishops, depending on their local situation.

The Bishop's Staff team and I have today discussed our own diocesan approach in the light of the national advice and our own context. The following outlines our guidance for all clergy with their churchwardens and other leaders in our churches, plants and pioneering networks.

I want to start by acknowledging that many of you have found streaming services and worship from your home a positive experience. There are obviously practical benefits, your Wi-Fi may be better and there are no concerns about safety and hygiene. Some of you also feel that streaming from home helps us to connect and empathise with our parishioners who are also restricted to their houses. If you wish to continue to worship, pray and stream services from home at present then you should not feel that the following advice deters you from doing so. We must not lose what we have gained and learned as home and online worship have flourished in recent weeks.

However, I also recognise that many of you are longing to get back into your church buildings to pray and worship. Also that your parishioners are desperate to see you lead worship and celebrate Eucharist in their much loved sacred space. Where that is the case, our advice is as follows:

· Clergy in their own parishes/plants or a designated lay leader, in consultation with the churchwardens, can enter their church buildings for activities such as streaming services or private prayer so long as the necessary hygiene and social distancing precautions are taken. The full list of activities are as follows:

1. Pray the Daily Office and/ or celebrate the Eucharist on behalf of the community they serve;
2. live stream or pre-record worship;
3. ring one bell to mark prayers being said or to mark events such as VE day or the Clap for Carers.
4. This advice should be read in conjunction with existing advice about people entering church buildings for maintenance reasons and for church buildings being used for essential community services such as foodbanks.

- If necessary members of the clergy person's or lay leader's own household may visit the church with them in order to help with live streaming or videoing. Under no circumstances should people from different households visit the church at the same time.
- Once inside the church, the door should be closed to avoid people following in from the street.
- The church should be near the clergy or lay leader's house to minimise travel.
- Clergy or lay leaders with underlying health conditions or those shielding others in their household with underlying health conditions should not leave home to visit church buildings.

As much as we all wish to return to what we were able to do in our church buildings before lockdown, it is absolutely vital that we continue to play our part in protecting our communities and the NHS. This means it is essential that we respond to this change in diocesan guidance in spirit as well as practice. We need to continue to follow government advice in detail and be seen to do so as leaders in our communities.

New COVID-19 cases and deaths have thankfully seen a continuous decline in East London and Essex in recent days. If this continues, as we pray it will, we hope to offer new guidance, subject to a change in government restrictions, about opening our churches for other purposes in the weeks ahead. Yet, please be clear that social distancing, hygiene rigour and restricted numbers are likely to be in place even then for some time ahead.

Finally, I know that as church and government advice continues to change in the near future, that will generate more questions and concerns. We will endeavour to answer these questions and deal with concerns as quickly as possible. If you do wish to raise anything, please speak with your Area Dean who will then raise it with their Archdeacon as necessary.