

Dear sisters and brothers,

Covid19 Level 4

Whatever the headlines may say, Christmas is not cancelled! As Christians have always done in good times and in bad, we will celebrate the birth of our Saviour in all the ways we can.

As you know, the First Minister announced at the weekend that, from midnight at the end of Christmas Day, the whole of mainland Scotland will go into Covid19 Level 4 for 3 weeks. This means that Christmas 'Bubbles' will now only apply on Christmas Day, although we are asked to avoid such contact if at all possible. And travelling into or out of Scotland, or across local authority boundaries, will not be permitted, except when really necessary, such as to attend work or medical treatment.

Public Worship

Going into Level 4 will also affect Public Worship in all our churches after Christmas Day. The SEC Advisory Group and the College of Bishops will issue detailed Guidance this week, but the main differences are:

- A maximum of 20 people (rather than 50 as in Level 3) will be permitted at a service (including service leader, organist, etc.)
- Worshippers will not be permitted to travel across a local authority boundary to attend a service (e.g. from Perth and Kinross to Fife, or Stirling to Clackmannanshire). However, a priest or lay minister may still cross a local authority boundary in order to take a service.

Level 4 permits Public Worship to continue, with the ongoing requirement of wearing face-coverings, physical distancing, and hygiene, but for a maximum of 20 people from within the local authority boundary.

- Charges which decide to remain open for Public Worship, within the Level 4 requirements, are welcome to do so.
- Charges which decide they cannot continue with enough safety for everyone, or which usually have more than 20 people attending, or which have many attenders who travel across a local authority boundary, may decide to suspend in-person worship in Level 4. They are welcome to do so. Please inform me if this is your decision (some have already approached me).

When churches were permitted to re-open for Public Worship earlier in the Pandemic, we asked clergy and vestries to open only when they judged it safe to do so. I want to emphasise that the same should apply to the decision to continue or to suspend Public Worship after Christmas.

Worship Continues

As was said in March when we first had to close our church buildings, suspending Public Worship does not mean suspending all worship, or that the Church of God is closed. Deciding to suspend Public Worship means once again helping congregations to turn to worship online or at home - by attending the online worship that your Charge provides, or by using the on-paper prayer resources that you send out, or by attending the online Eucharist offered by the SEC every Sunday. And, as in earlier phases of the Pandemic, it means giving ongoing pastoral care to people by phone.

Making a Decision

It will be important for you and your Vestry to decide as quickly as possible whether to suspend Public Worship in Level 4, so that your congregation can be informed very soon.

This will involve some quick decisions and some rapid changes, and it may involve considerable stress. With the inevitable extra work the situation may require, I hope you will feel free to prioritise

all the tasks. None of us will be providing the perfect Christmas sermon this year! Please don't fail to take whatever post-Christmas time-off you and your family were planning, even if now you can't go away and have to spend the time-off at home. The Pandemic is stretching everyone in spirit as well as in mind and body, and your wellbeing matters too.

Please contact me if I can help you or your Vestry as you discuss this and make decisions, or if you need support a very difficult time. My phone numbers are:

Diocesan Office: 01738 580426

Bishop's House: 01738 561567

email: bishop@standrews.anglican.org

Into all the tragedy and trauma of all the waves of this Pandemic, Christmas breaks with the good news of hope - Emmanuel, God is with us. I hope that your Christmas is holy and happy, and that New Year will bring blessings and healing to you, your family, your congregation, and your community.

With my warm regards, and prayer,
Bishop Ian

The Right Revd Ian Paton
Bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld and Dunblane
Diocesan Office,
28a Balhousie Street,
Perth PH1 5HJ

01738 580426

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