

Dear Friends,

I'm sorry about the short notice, but this afternoon (Thursday 23rd) the Church of England has published new guidance strongly advising clergy and their congregations to wear face coverings when attending church services. It follows updated Government guidance strongly encouraging people attending all places of worship to wear face coverings.

You will have seen in the news that there have been a number of recent coronavirus spikes in England which have led to local lockdowns. It is these which have prompted the Government's new guidance for places of worship, in tandem with face coverings being mandatory in shops from tomorrow.

Face coverings are a means of protecting others if (unbeknown to us) we are carrying the virus, and wearing them is an act of loving Christian service to our neighbour. They are also a way of helping people to return to public worship in church with a greater sense of safety provided all the other safeguards are also kept in place.

We expect that the guidance will remain in place for as long as the Government advises it. Some of their advice is copied below for your information.

Q. Should I wear a face covering in a church building?

A. Face coverings are currently mandatory on public transport and will be mandatory in shops and in supermarkets from 24th July 2020. People are also encouraged to wear face coverings in enclosed public spaces where there are people they do not normally meet, such as a place of worship. We strongly advise that face coverings should be worn by all those attending a place of worship, including ministers, worshippers, staff, volunteers, contractors and visitors, where there may be other people present; remembering that they are mainly intended to protect other people, not the wearer, from coronavirus COVID-19 and that they are not a replacement for physical distancing and regular hand washing.

Q. What is a face covering?

A. A face covering is something which safely covers the nose and mouth. You can buy reusable or single-use face coverings. You may also use a scarf, bandana, religious garment or hand-made cloth covering but these must securely fit round the side of the face. These are different from surgical and other face masks that are part of PPE used in health and social care settings. We do not recommend the use of PPE in church buildings other than for specialist cleaning activities.

Q. Why should we wear face coverings?

A. Coronavirus (COVID-19) can spread predominantly by droplets and perhaps aerosols from coughs, sneezes and speaking. The best available scientific evidence is that, when used correctly, wearing a face covering can reduce the spread of coronavirus droplets in certain circumstances, helping to protect others. Because face coverings are mainly intended to protect others, not the wearer, from coronavirus (COVID-19) they are not a replacement for physical distancing and regular hand washing.

Q. How should I wear a face covering?

A. A face covering should:

- cover your nose and mouth while allowing you to breathe comfortably
- fit comfortably but securely against the side of the face
- be secured to the head with ties or ear loops
- be made of a material that you find to be comfortable and breathable, such as cotton
- ideally include at least two layers of fabric (the World Health Organisation recommends three depending on the fabric used)

- unless disposable, it should be able to be washed with other items of laundry according to fabric washing instructions and dried without causing the face covering to be damaged

When wearing a face covering you should:

- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before putting a face covering on
- avoid wearing on your neck or forehead
- avoid touching the part of the face covering in contact with your mouth and nose, as it could be contaminated with the virus
- change the face covering if it becomes damp or if you've touched it

When removing a face covering:

- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before removing
- only handle the straps, ties or clips
- do not share with someone else to use
- if single-use, dispose of it carefully in a residual waste bin and do not recycle
- if reusable, wash it in line with manufacturer's instructions at the highest temperature appropriate for the fabric
- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser once removed

Q. Are there exemptions from wearing face coverings?

A. You do not need to wear a face covering if you have a legitimate reason not to. This includes:

- young children under the age of 11
- not being able to put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment, or disability
- if putting on, wearing or removing a face covering will cause you severe distress
- if you are travelling with or providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading to communicate
- to avoid harm or injury, or the risk of harm or injury, to yourself or others
- to avoid injury, or to escape a risk of harm, and you do not have a face covering with you
- to eat or drink, but only if you need to
- to take medication
- if a police officer or other official requests you remove your face covering

There are also scenarios when you are permitted to remove a face covering when asked:

- If asked to do so by shop staff for the purpose of age identification
- If speaking with people who rely on lip reading, facial expressions and clear sound. Some may ask you, either verbally or in writing, to remove a covering to help with communication

In the light of these instructions can I urge all who intend to attend the service on Sunday to wear a face-covering as instructed. Should it be impossible for you to get a face covering before Sunday we will provide a disposable mask if necessary, so no-one need worry about not being able to attend.

It is probably best to regard this action that we each take in wearing a face covering as one helping to protect others, and is just another way of extending loving care to one another, even if it inconveniences ourselves.