

Worship at St. Mark's following the lifting of Coronavirus restrictions

Following the government's lifting of coronavirus restrictions from Monday 19th July, we have carefully studied guidance from them, the Church of England and the London Borough of Newham to help us arrive prayerfully at a decision about continuing to worship safely at St. Mark's.

What does science say about coronavirus?

- Coronavirus is transmitted primarily by small droplets in the air from people infected with the virus. For example, these can be exhaled when people are talking, singing, coughing or sneezing. The droplets can travel quickly, and if inhaled by others can infect them with the virus.
- Coronavirus can also be transmitted through physical contact and contact with infected surfaces.
- Coronavirus can make people of all ages seriously ill, particularly if they have a range of underlying health vulnerabilities.
- Vaccination reduces the risk of transmission and infection. However, it does not prevent this entirely, and even doubly-vaccinated people can catch the virus and become ill.

What actions have been scientifically proven to help reduce infection?

- Wearing a mask to contain any droplets we may produce can reduce transmission by up to 25%.
- Maintaining a safe distance from people we do not know.
- Avoiding crowded indoor places, or at least limiting the length of time spent there.
- Ensuring indoor spaces are well-ventilated at all times.
- Regular sanitising of hands and surfaces, and quarantining of equipment for at least 72 hours.
- Stopping the provision of food and drink where many people are involved in preparing and serving.
- In a church context, avoiding actions that can spread droplets, such as socialising indoors before and after worship, singing indoors and physical contact such as through the peace and communion in two kinds, where the wine is shared from the common cup.

What has St. Mark's done since the start of the pandemic?

We have complied fully with government, Church of England and local authority guidance to ensure that all the points above have been addressed at all times. As a result, many members of our church family have told us that they feel safe attending worship in the church. This is backed up by the numbers attending worship having more than doubled since Easter, when we were able to begin worshipping in church once again.

How will the lifting of restrictions change what happens at St. Mark's?

In their guidance the government, Church of England and local authority have all urged caution, and stress above all that at all times we must take account of our own situation and circumstances.

Confirmed cases of coronavirus rose sharply in the weeks before 19th July and the outlook is uncertain. It may be that in the autumn some restrictions will need to be reimposed, particularly if new coronavirus variants with different transmissibility and levels of protection from existing vaccines are found. The autumn and winter are also peak times for flu and other respiratory illnesses.

As Christians, we have a duty of love, respect, care and concern towards each other by keeping each other safe when we attend worship in the building, even if this means disappointment that we are unable to do what we might prefer to do.

This duty also extends to all key workers, including of course those working in the NHS - not only those dealing directly with coronavirus, but also those dealing with people suffering from other health conditions, which may well have been aggravated by longer waiting times for surgery and treatment.

As the Vicar and Churchwardens, it is our legal duty to ensure everyone using our building remains safe. Therefore, we have prayerfully and thoroughly studied and discussed all the government, Church of England and local authority guidance we have received.

Although the latest government and Church of England guidance in theory now allows us greater freedom, both also make clear that we should act with great caution.

Therefore, we have concluded that over the summer we will not change anything that we have been doing since Easter. This is because the measures in place already reflect our Christian duty to care for and keep each other safe, whatever our situation, and have sufficiently reassured those who may have been hesitant about attending worship to enable them to do so.

This means that:

- We will continue to ask you to keep others safe by wearing a face covering over your nose and mouth at all times inside the building. As now, if people arrive without a face covering, we will offer them one and ask them to wear it while in the building.
- We will continue to arrange seating so that people can remain at a safe distance from those outside their households.
- We will continue to sing together in the car park rather than in the church.
- We will continue to sign the peace and to receive communion in one kind, exactly as now.
- We will continue to ask you not to attend worship if you feel unwell.
- We will continue to ask people to sign in for services and to ensure a staggered and rapid exit afterwards, with socialising taking place outside the building.
- We will continue to deep-clean and sanitise all areas of the church after use, and quarantine equipment used where necessary.
- We will continue to ensure the building is well-ventilated at all times by allowing air to circulate from open windows and doors.

- We will not be able to re-commence serving refreshments after services for the moment.
- We will continue to offer a short online act of worship for those unable for any reason to attend worship physically.

We realise that this may not be what some were expecting, and may be different from other areas of life. However, we know too that all members of our church family will accept our duty as Christians to show our love for each other as Jesus commanded, by keeping each other safe at all times.

We thank our gracious Father for the privilege of being able to do so, and trust that He will continue to guide us in the weeks ahead.

Revd Ben King, Vicar
Sharon Yates and Mike Richardson, Churchwardens

23rd July 2021