

Covid-19: NI churches prepare for second pandemic Christmas

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Churches in Northern Ireland are tweaking their Christmas plans as they approach a second festive period affected by Covid-19.

Some have measures beyond what is required by law, while others are urging caution in line with guidelines.

The Methodist Church has urged ministers to be "creative" with Christmas services.

Meanwhile, the Presbyterian Church has introduced stricter mask rules after the emergence of the Omicron variant.

It now requires masks to be worn throughout the duration of all services.

BBC News NI has a look at what the rules are and what each of Northern Ireland's major churches are doing ahead of one of their most important periods.

What are the rules on attending services?

Churches have been operating under Covid regulations since resuming indoor worship in the spring.

Under current regulations in Northern Ireland, churchgoers are only required to wear masks when entering and leaving church buildings.

Face coverings can be removed during worship, however their use is still "strongly advised".

Prior to updating its policy on face coverings, the Presbyterian Church required masks to be worn while singing, in addition to when entering and exiting the building.

In a letter sent to all Presbyterian ministers on 26 November, the church said it was updating its policy to require all attendees aged 13 and above to wear masks for the duration of services.

"This includes funeral services and wedding services, in the latter case the bridal party are exempt, but should be wise in relation to social distancing," said the church in a statement.

The regulations also state that a risk assessment must be carried out in order to determine the number of people that can safely meet in a building, although this is not required if the gathering is smaller than 15 people.

Social distancing, hand hygiene and good ventilation are all encouraged under official guidance for churches.

However, churches are having to consider tweaks to their normal worship in the run-up to Christmas

'Seek to minimise risk' - Presbyterian Church

The general secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland said Christmas was a time when some families "make their one and only visit to church".

"We want everyone to feel safe and welcome, as we seek to minimise risk and mitigate against it," said the Reverend Trevor Gribben in a statement to BBC News NI.

Mr Gribben said the church wanted to "balance the desire of people to join together for worship with the need to do so safely".

He said where it was no longer possible to have a large choir in a church service, some were being recorded in advance, socially distanced in the empty church.

Online streaming of services is also continuing in the church, according to Mr Gribben, with some churches also using a booking system for those who want to attend in-person.

'Fewer congregational hymns' - Methodist Church

In a letter issued to all Methodist ministers in Northern Ireland, the church's general secretary urged ministers to be "creative" when it comes to Christmas plans.

"Carol services should have fewer congregational hymns," said the Reverend Dr Heather Morris.

Videos and instrumentals were encouraged as an alternative to limit congregational singing.

The letter urged "special care" be taken with the planning of any Christmas lunches.

Methodist ministers have been asked to take a lateral flow test at least once per week.

The church also requires those wanting to attend services to book in advance.

"This is to gauge the numbers attending against the capacity permitted for the main church building and to know if it will be necessary to have an overflow provision," it said.

Masks are required to be worn throughout the duration of services for those attending the Methodist Church.

'Careful planning' - Catholic Church

In a joint statement the Catholic Bishops of Ireland said they were looking forward to the celebration of Christmas "with quiet expectation".

The statement said face coverings should continue to be worn "at all gatherings in our churches and parish buildings".

"Careful planning" and "sensible precautions" were needed in parishes ahead of Christmas, when "larger numbers" of people attend churches, said the bishops.

"High standards of hygiene and ventilation in our churches, allowing space between ourselves and others, are essential ways in which we can contribute to the health of our parish communities," they added.

"We welcome and encourage the ongoing programme of vaccination.

"It has helped to ease the restrictions placed on the social and religious life of our communities and to keep hospital beds free for other essential and urgent medical needs," the statement said.

'Cautious approach' - Church of Ireland

The Church of Ireland said a "cautious approach" continued in many parishes "particularly around mask wearing".

"Those intending to join Christmas services should be prepared for social distancing and other measures to counter the spread of Covid," it said in a statement to BBC News NI.

Hand sanitisers are being provided at entrances to churches with attendees asked to share details for contact tracing.

"The most important thing for any parish is that people attending public worship feel safe," the church said.

"The wearing of face coverings throughout services is being encouraged as a sign of care for our neighbours, especially as people may feel more comfortable being in a setting where others are taking this precaution."

The statement added that in some communities, parishes may use their church halls as well as the main church buildings to "allow more people to participate in worship".

The church's website contains a page on Covid-19 guidance for parishes.