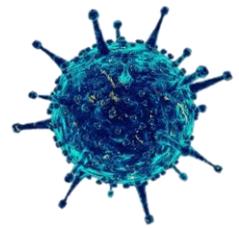


Covid-19: Acting Faithfully and Responsibly

NWBA Update – 25th February 2021



These notes are one of a series, designed to offer some help as you think through your role as Church Leaders. They are not intended and should not be used in place of relevant Government advice – they seek to respond to the latest information at the date shown above. If subsequent advice has been issued by Government, BUGB or NWBA, please be guided by that.

The publication of our Government's latest Roadmap for a way forward beyond Covid lockdown has inevitably fuelled conversations across our churches about how, why and when we might re-open our buildings. We have to recognise of course the strong emphasis that these are the EARLIEST DATES, and they remain subject to many forces that are beyond our control.

For all that we will welcome this, how might we avoid the temptation of simply being "roadmap driven"? This is not a set of instructions that we are expected to dutifully follow, but the parameters in which we need to then think for ourselves. Or to put in bluntly, we might remind ourselves that Boris Johnson is not the leader of our church, we are – while roadmaps are helpful we are called to be a Spirit-led people.

But this does feel like a key moment to consider our role as congregations and leaders. The publication of the roadmap might well have raised expectations within our congregations and communities, and in a society that seems to treat everything as a right, this might well generate assumptions that others have an obligation to simply provide what is expected – including church services! It feels important therefore, that churches carefully consider their own way forward, and perhaps as a first step, simply communicate to those affected that we are thinking things through and will not be thoughtlessly following various rafts of legislation. After all, we are supposed to be non-conformists!

One way of doing this might be to consider what each of the stages on the roadmap represent, and seek to consider practically and prayerfully how this impacts our local church:

8th March

It is quite clear that the key priority for just about everyone is to get our schools re-opened. This includes certain childcare and children's supervised activities, so our immediate reaction might be to consider whether or not our church children's programmes are included in that. This might highlight from the outset that there are different ways of engaging more generally – is our instinct to ask "what can we gain from this?" or "what can we do to support it?". My hope is that we might tend towards the latter.

So let's remember why these activities are re-opening, it is to support schools as they re-open and the many parents of children that we rely on to provide education. This, like every other step, will increase the risk of infection, so let's remember that if we then seek to draw children and families into additional activities, we are adding to that risk.

Perhaps our first instinct should be to consider what implications this might have for those involved and how we can support them. Many in our churches will work in education, and will be facing extra pressure with every school child needing to be tested for Covid twice a week. Might they need to be released from church responsibilities to ensure they can find the extra capacity to fulfil what is required of them? How can we support all those involved in education pastorally? We might also consider if there are other ways we can support our schools practically – I know of at least one local Baptist church that has offered its premises to a nearby school so as to provide them with extra space to better maintain a regime of social distancing.

Care home residents will also be allowed one designated visitor. Again we might consider which members of our church community we need to release and support as they visit relatives that they have not been able to physically be with for best part of a year. Might we also consider if there are those for whom we need to be

that point of contact, and make sure that our ministers and pastoral teams are deployed where this is appropriate.

29th March

This is the provisional date for when groups of six or two households can meet together outdoors. This may mean that pastoral conversations and opportunities to pray with or for another person could become possible. To what degree may we have a role in enabling that, or perhaps providing the outdoor private space that many in our community might value? Again, perhaps this is another moment not so much to consider “what can we do now?” but “what would it be useful for us to enable?” This too is a moment to recognise that many of our church families, including our ministers and paid workers, will be given the first chance in many months to connect with loved ones and families. Is this a moment to fill our diaries with outdoor religious gatherings, or release one another to be the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents and friends that God has made us to be? How too might we look out for those who become excluded through this – this may be the key area in which we need to be proactive.

This is also the date when the “stay at home” rule is planned to end. Again, we may be tempted to consider what opportunities for church activity this might create, but let us remember that like all of these milestones, this will be another moment when the risk of infection steps up. What is our role in helping to facilitate safe travel, safe returns to work etc. Church members may well be travelling home from work later to avoid rush hours, and encounter increased stress as they return to workplaces for the first time in many months. For some, arriving home might be their first opportunity to take off their facemask! This is not simply a moment for looking at the rules and asking “what can the church do?”, but reflecting more widely on the wellbeing of our sisters and brothers in Christ and asking “what do we realistically have the capacity to do?” and “What might we need to curtail to enable people to find their way through the lifestyle changes that this will entail?”

12th April

This is the provisional date for the re-opening of non-essential shops and services. Perhaps we might make our pitch that some of our church activities also represent “non-essential services” – and there may be contexts in which this is a valid and legitimate argument. Yet we might also remember that our church activities are not an end in themselves, but combine to fulfil a higher purpose – to seek to express who we are as the Body of Christ and what we believe as the message of Christ. While we recognise again the added pressures and risks on those that we rely on to sustain our church activities, this feels like a key moment to look beyond those activities themselves and ask “what is our purpose as a Gospel people?” and “how is that best fulfilled within these eased restrictions?”

17th May

One key feature of this particular milestone is that it represents a shift of emphasis from enabling the provision of services to the opportunity for gathering. As those who describe themselves as the “gathered church” this again has significance. Gatherings of 30 for certain life events will become possible, though it remains unclear whether there will be any limit or provision for church congregations. But it feels that this is a moment to ask some key questions:

Does this gathering truly reflect the spirit and intent of the latest regulations?

Are we capable of observing Covid restrictions properly and can this be done without causing undue stress and pressure on our leaders and trustees?

What is the purpose of our gathering and why is it important?

Who might be excluded by our gathering and how should we respond to that?

What messages does our gathering give out to the wider community?

How will we manage unforeseen issues?

21st June

This is already being heralded as the “end of lockdown” in some quarters, but this is a significant misrepresentation. This is the date when it is hoped that all events and premises will re-open, but it is very clear that the Government anticipates significant testing and infection control measures remaining in place. The final arrangements will be subject to what is being described as an “Events Research Programme”. It is clear that if churches do re-open on this date, significant measures are likely to need to be in place, which may include such familiar realities as facemasks, 2m distancing and sanitisers along with possible new issues such as whether people should provide proof of vaccination, be regularly tested, etc. etc. It is naïve to imagine that church services will simply be the same as what they were, and again we need to think carefully about what is required. The key question is not so much “how can we best resemble church as we knew it within these measures?” but “how do we encounter God and enable each other’s discipleship in this context?”

There remain many uncertainties, and while each of these phases will raise its own specific issues, perhaps these thoughts could be summarised through a number of questions we might ask ourselves as each milestone is reached:

How will our actions be viewed and perceived by the wider community – what implications will this have for our ongoing witness and mission?

What is the spirit and intent of the Covid restrictions that are being retained? Irrespective of what we can or can’t do – how can we best reflect and support this?

What is this latest relaxation seeking to achieve – how can we best support that?

How will the changes in wider society impact our existing members and leaders – what pastoral, emotional and practical needs do we need to take into account?

What needs in our local community will emerge as these various changes happen – how can we best respond to these?

What risks will our activities generate – does their purpose and benefit justify these?

Irrespective of what might be allowed - how can we best respond to the pastoral and spiritual needs of our congregation through this phase?

What is the purpose of what we are doing – are we being defined by this rather than simply what legislation allows?

What is God saying to us and how are we remaining in step with God’s Spirit?

Please be prayerful, thoughtful and responsible and keep up to date with information from the health authorities and our Baptist Union.