

Review of Lockdown Easing Arrangements - 7 April 2021

We are currently in Stage Two of the lockdown-easing process set out in June 2020: “the resumption of public worship in one or more of our churches each Sunday; the 10.45am service broadcast live online from inside one of the churches, and continuing to include the opportunity for those who are self-isolating to take part via pre-recorded inserts, which would be shown on a screen in church as well as being included in the live online broadcast.”

‘Self-isolating’ includes voluntarily self-isolating, to the extent of preferring to join Sunday worship online rather than in person. Throughout lockdown, and throughout Lent, we have consistently had more households choosing to follow live online than individuals attending in person.

It should be noted that it continues to be a significant technical challenge to create this ‘hybrid’ Stage Two event each Sunday, dependent on the availability on every occasion of specific individuals to set up and operate a significant amount of complex equipment.

The original description of Stage Three specified that we would move to Stage Three “when the pandemic is over, and all Covid-19-related self-isolation has ended.” We might now envisage the move to Stage Three taking place when the overwhelming majority of regular attenders have chosen to move from taking part online to attending in person, to the extent that the inclusion of pre-recorded inserts in the service becomes rare rather than routine. In Stage Three, “a simple online live broadcast of the service from church can be continued indefinitely for the housebound, the physically distant, and any others who may appreciate the opportunity that it presents.” A simple live online broadcast in this format was successfully established by the volunteers David Wright and Richard Haworth on Sunday 3 January, using equipment obtained specifically for the purpose, and now kept in church, plus some semi-permanent wiring installations.

Next steps

Developed from proposals originally published in July 2020

Hornby

Using “one metre plus” social distancing (one metre plus a face covering and no congregational singing), overcrowding has not been a problem in Hornby. Even on Easter Day, there was space still available in the servery, the children’s area, the choir, and the sanctuary. Should overcrowding become a problem (if more people return and social distancing is still required or preferred), it may become appropriate to run the service twice.

Benefice

It is not practical to have two services in different venues on any Sunday morning while the ‘hybrid’ services (with pre-recorded inserts) continue, because of the preparation required before the service (Michael and Simon typically arrive at Saint Margaret’s for 9.15am to set up).

Northern Parishes

Resuming regular Sunday morning worship in any parish church of the four requires the availability of:

- * duty wardens to set up (covid-safe)
- * sidespersons (to take the register)
- * scripture readers (three per service)
- * refreshments teams (once these are permitted)
- * an ordained or lay minister or volunteer to lead the service
 - with sufficient of each to cover for absence.

In addition each parish needs a rota organiser, cleaners, churchyard/garden maintenance teams, building maintenance support, a PCC secretary, a treasurer, and someone to look after the linen, altar frontals, and sacristy supplies (candles, bread, and wine). Only with all these in place is it practical to resume regular Sunday worship.

United Benefice Services

There has been a great sense of unity across the four parishes during the last year, which would naturally point towards more United Benefice Services in the future. Previously, United Benefice Services have been poorly supported in terms of numbers attending, but there has been ‘in person’ attendance from all four parishes during the Stage-Two ‘hybrid’ services broadcast from Hornby. In terms of practicality for United Benefice Services (broadcast or not), Hornby continues to have the most seating, and the best lighting, heating, parking, accessibility, facilities, and space for covid-safe communion.

Separately, Whittington and Arkholme had already combined into a single congregation, alternating between the two sites, before Covid. It may be worth considering extending this arrangement to Gressingham.

Services away from Sunday morning, and Festival Churches

There is much more flexibility when services take place other than on Sunday morning, eg Sunday afternoon or a weekday; and all churches can continue to operate indefinitely as Festival Churches, open for baptisms, weddings, funerals, and special festival services on dates throughout the year. Whittington's Patronal Festival and Holy Saturday services, and Arkholme's Good Friday service, have been well attended during the last year.

8am service

The 8am service is a special case, and the key will be seeing the small group of regular attenders choosing to return to worship in person rather than online, and expressing a preference for a return to the 8am service, rather than continuing to participate in the 10.45am service as at present.

An additional opportunity

When pre-recorded inserts are not used in the live-broadcast service, it becomes far more practical to link two or more locations using Zoom, making it practical to establish simultaneous participation in a single (live-broadcast) United Benefice Service from multiple venues, with live contributions from each participating location audible, and visible on screen, in every participating location. The technical challenge of this is significant for the Zoom 'host', but not particularly for the individual participating churches, which would need only to set up a laptop running Zoom [and point it at the congregation or the person speaking, and put a church radio-microphone next to it to amplify it]. A distribution of Holy Communion could be organised at each location.

Internet connections

Whittington has joined Hornby and Arkholme in having a high-speed B4RN internet connection. Gressingham has an adequate 4G mobile internet signal, used successfully to broadcast from Gressingham on Sunday 27 December.

Michael Hampson, 7 April 2021

APPENDIX

Setting up covid-safe Holy Communion

1. Put on face mask
2. Without touching the items inside, open the sealed containers of:
 - (i) individual (disposable/recyclable) communion cups
 - (ii) communion wafers
 - (iii) gluten-free communion wafers
3. Sanitise hands
4. With alcohol-based disinfectant wipes, wipe
 - (i) the platters for communion wafers
 - (ii) the acrylic communion cup tray
 - (iii) the communion wine dispenser
5. Set out the wafers (and one gluten-free wafer) and set out and fill the individual communion cups
6. Cover up all the items using the transparent covers
7. Remove face mask (if/when appropriate)

Face coverings and social distancing are required for all those present

All the following are currently suspended: Greetings on arrival, singing, refreshments, the use of hymn books and service cards, the availability of the children's corner.