

Why St Aidan's will not be opening for public services from 4th July

Brothers and sisters!

You will have heard today that the government is allowing churches to open for attended services as from 4th July. No parish is required to open for services in this government announcement. The new regulations ALLOW churches to open IF they decide to do so. The decision to open for services or not has to be made in the light of local circumstances. I am in regular touch with the bishop about this for the Archdiocese.

Fr Emmanuel and I are now advising you that we shall NOT be opening the Church for regular services for the time being, for the following reasons:

1. **Masks:** The government has made it quite clear that although it is reducing the social distancing rule from 2 metres to 1 metre, all the existing safety measures remain in place, but with the addition now of extra protections and measures.

The risk of infection increases significantly in the reduction from 2 metres to 1 metre, so face coverings (preferably N95 or FFP3 grade with filtered valves for better breathing) would become necessary if we were to open. This would mean that ALL parishioners would need to wear masks all the time in church! It would also mean that all men (including the clergy) would have to be clean shaven. Masks in confined spaces with a risk of infection just do not work effectively with beards. The fit has to be tight to your skin all around your face. Ask any medic in the congregation. This is the standard for the effective use of masks. This is too much to ask of people in my opinion. In any case, there are other issues preventing our return now.

2. **Holy Communion:** There is no way that Fr Emmanuel or I could give you Holy Communion from a distance of at least 1 metre; it just is not physically possible. We cannot turn a blind eye to this issue. 1 metre social distancing is already an unwelcome concession in my opinion. To breach it further by the priest coming closer is just not acceptable (let alone legal!). The only exception we need to make here is when the clergy give the last rites before death.
3. **Singing and chanting:** The government has made it clear that singing or chanting in the services is not allowed. This is because there is strong scientific evidence that the virus is transmitted very effectively in enclosed spaces by speaking forcefully or singing. You cannot have an authentic Orthodox service as we know without singing and chanting.
4. **Rotas for Attendance:** 1 metre social distancing would mean that in addition to the choir and clergy, there could only be at most 20 people in St Aidan's at any one time. The imposition of a rota for attending church is completely unacceptable and unenforceable. Nobody wants to drop in to church expecting

a welcome, only to find themselves turned away on the basis that “we are fully booked today, sorry!”

5. **All the Don'ts!** There are so many other restrictions that we would have to enforce, such as: no kissing of icons, relics or any other object in church; no kissing of the priest's hand; no touching of church furniture including door handles; no food or drink, being just a few. There would be precious little left of Orthodox worship and fellowship in these circumstances.
6. **Toilets:** Finally, the toilets would be locked and put out of use. Without this, thorough cleaning in protective clothing would have to happen after each use. Who is going to do that cleaning while the service is in progress? Would you? Would you be that parent to tell your child that they will “just have to wait”? Would you be prepared to be “toilet monitor” guarding the door. No, nobody would, but that is exactly what would have to happen.

With all these factors in mind, Fr Emmanuel and I are not prepared to encourage people to come back to church until they can do so safely and until we can have a normal Orthodox experience of worship with no restrictions whatsoever. This means that we all have to be patient until that time comes.

There are some of you, I know, who think that time will never come but if you think this, you are wrong. The experience of pandemics in the history of mankind is that eventually they all end. Before the advent of modern medicine this happened with effective quarantine and hygiene and the normal disease cycle whereby a virus eventually becomes less harmful. This is what happened with the Spanish Flu in 1918/1919. We have the advantage now of teams of scientists all over the world working to produce a vaccine and the signs currently are very good that one will be found. If a vaccine is not possible, then just like HIV, the virus can be made less dangerous with the use of antiviral medications.

When all or part of this becomes available to the general public, then **AND ONLY THEN** shall we open up St Aidan's again with no restrictions, safe in the knowledge that people will not die through any reckless behaviour on our part.

Finally, we must put the government's decision today to ease the lockdown even further in its proper context. Many parts of Europe are now reimposing lockdowns to guard against a second wave of infections. Sadly, in the next few weeks, I think we shall see the same thing happening here so all of this which has been announced today will be slammed into reverse. Hopefully, in the second wave, we shall have much better measures to protect the public and health service and care personnel.

Love in Christ

Fr. Gregory and Fr Emmanuel