

## COVID-19 Guidance for the re-opening of faith-based places of worship and services

These following obligatory conditions are issued under the Public Health Act Chapter 465 of the Laws of Malta and require strict adherence. Failure to adhere to these conditions will result in enforcement procedures as provided by the Act.

### Obligatory conditions to be observed in faith-based places of worship and services

The Superintendent of Public Health hereby orders that in all faith-based places of worship the following measures shall be implemented:

- a) exercise the right of refusal of entry into the place of worship of persons if they are visibly unwell or have respiratory symptoms;
- b) subject persons to temperature checks at entrance for the presence of fever, with those having a temperature of 37.2° Celsius (99° Fahrenheit) or higher to be denied entrance;
- c) provide an appropriate 70% alcohol hand-rub at the entrance of the place of worship and ensure that all persons sanitise their hands prior to entrance;
- d) regulate orderly entrance into and exit from the place of worship adopting crowd management techniques as necessary;
- e) ensure that within the place of worship every person keeps a minimum of 2 metres from each other in all directions;
- f) ensure that the maximum number of persons that the place of worship can hold at any one time is one person per 4 square metres of the area reserved for worshippers.
- g) indicate with visible markings outside and inside the place of worship two (2) metre distances that persons shall respect whilst queuing to enter / exit;
- h) affix visible signage at the entrance of the place of worship indicating the maximum capacity that the place of worship can hold at any one time;
- i) ensure wearing of masks or visors;
- j) provide ongoing cleaning and disinfection operations of the place of worship.

### Scope of this Guidance

Faith and spirituality are important in the lives of people. It follows that in the gradual relaxation of measures of containment, careful consideration needs to be given to the re-opening of faith-based places of worship and re-institution of related faith-based services.

### Core concepts in the control of COVID-19

In order to decide upon the nature and extent of re-opening places of worship and re-instituting worship services, a number of core concepts relevant to the control of COVID-19 need were considered and addressed.

## 1. Protection of vulnerable persons

All vulnerable persons are at increased risk of developing serious complications if infected by the COVID-19 virus. Vulnerable persons shall limit the period outdoors to the least time possible and shall at all times exercise social distancing. Religious leaders who fall under the vulnerable category should exercise caution while officiating in places of worship and/or services.

## 2. Knowledge of symptoms

Leaders and members of the religious community must be well aware of the symptoms of COVID infection and how to take the necessary action should these appear. Common symptoms may include any of the following: fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny or congested nose, muscle or joint pains, tiredness, headache, loss or altered sense of taste or smell, headache, vomiting or diarrhoea. Persons who are ill, including those with minor symptoms, must NOT go to the place of worship. They must stay at home, phone 111 or their doctor or the primary health care centre and follow the advice given.

## 3. Personal Protective Measures

Every person must be committed to practice respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene measures. Worshippers are encouraged to carry hand sanitisers or alcohol wipes with them when visiting the place of worship. In addition, they shall wear a mask or visor and observe proper mask / visor hygiene.

Persons who are ill, including those with minor symptoms, must NOT go to the place of worship. If coughing or sneezing cannot be helped whilst at the place of worship, however, they must cover their nose and mouth with a tissue which should be placed in a personal pocket or handbag and thrown away at the first opportunity. If no tissues are available, the inner side of the flexed elbow should be used. Hand sanitiser should immediately be applied, or alcohol wipes used to clean the skin area affected. Used wipes also need to be disposed of at the first opportunity. If this is not immediately possible, they should be placed in a personal pocket. This is very important as otherwise surrounding objects or people may become contaminated. Used tissues and wipes must NEVER be left lying around or thrown on the floor.

Hand hygiene is another essential core component in the plan to re-open places of worship for religious services. Apart from encouraging people to bring their own sanitiser and/or alcohol wipes, hand sanitisers with 70% alcohol should be made available at each entrance to and exit from the place of worship. Hands need to be rubbed with alcohol on entering and prior to exit from the place of worship. Worshippers must go straight to their place. There must be no loitering or wandering around in the place of worship. There shall not be any physical contact with other worshippers.

## 4. Physical distancing

Physical distancing remains an essential core concept and one of the most effective preventive actions to reduce the spread of coronavirus. It therefore remains very important for persons to maintain a distance of at least 2 meters from each other at all times whilst in the place of worship. No physical contact is allowed.

## 5. Large gatherings and places of worship

Large gatherings remain suspended. Worship services may be held both outdoors and indoors. Outdoor services are subject to the provisions of the Number of Persons in Public Spaces Order, 2020 which establish that in any open outdoor space accessible to members of the general public, the gathering of masses of more than seventy-five (75) persons in an organised mass event is prohibited.

It is necessary to decide the appropriate maximum number of persons that can be allowed at any one time. The ratio for the calculation of the maximum capacity at any one time shall be one person per 4m<sup>2</sup> of effective worship space. This should be clearly displayed on the outside of the place of worship. This number must be in ratio to the square meters effectively available for worship, the 2-meter physical distancing required between persons, as well as to the specific physical features and layout of the place of worship. Any part of the place of worship that is not used as effective worship space should not be considered in the calculation. It is important that worshippers do not congregate in groups but must enter and exit one after the other with at least 2 meters of space in between. Adequate signage should be available. Adequate ventilation is important.

## 6. Worship arrangements

Places for worshippers must be clearly marked. Instructions must be posted at the entrance to the place of worship. Attention is drawn to the fact that coronavirus survives longer on wooden surfaces, which should be thoroughly sanitised after each use. Families entering the place of worship together are an exception. They can be together close to each other, in a particular section of the place of worship, at an appropriate distance from others, and this section shall be appropriately labelled.

## 7. Cleaning and disinfection

Since the virus can remain on surfaces, it is essential that the place of worship and all items used in services are regularly cleaned and disinfected accordingly. Ancillary services such as bathroom services and vestments all need to be considered. Special attention needs to be given to commonly touched surfaces such as handles, chairs, fan switches, as well as podiums and microphones.

Bathroom facilities can be used. Bathrooms are to be adequately supplied with toilet paper, paper towels, water, soap, hand sanitiser as well as cleaning products. Worshippers are to respect other worshippers and keep facilities clean. Frequently touched surfaces are to be cleaned as often as necessary. After worship services, bathrooms are to be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

## 8. Entry, exit and monitoring of compliance

Entry and exit to the place of worship should remain open. Persons entering the place of worship should have their temperature scanned and if temperature is higher than 37.2 degrees Celsius (99<sup>0</sup> Fahrenheit) will be denied entry. A collaborator with personal protective equipment (gloves and mask/visor) may stay at the entrance/exit to the place of worship to ensure that persons with obvious and visible symptoms are not allowed entry, the maximum number of persons allowed is not exceeded, physical distancing is observed, and to ensure an orderly entrance and exit.

## 9. Books, leaflets, etc

There should be no distribution of leaflets or hymn books which are meant to be re-used between one service and another.

## **10. Singing**

Singing may produce droplet/aerosolised particles increasing the risk of transmission of coronavirus. It is therefore recommended that no singing is carried out during worship services.

## **11. Handshaking and physical contact**

No handshaking or other person-to-person physical contact shall be allowed.

## **12. Collections**

No baskets or other receptacles for collections shall be passed around the members of the congregation. Neither shall there be any person going around the place of worship to collect any money or other form of donations. An offertory basket or other receptacle may be placed at a suitable location in the place of worship. Members of the congregation will be able to drop their offer in this basket/container without touching any part of the container. Care must be taken for members of the congregation to maintain the 2-meter distance between each other and not crowd around this location. The basket/container needs to be cleaned/disinfected after use. Anyone handling money must be reminded to wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds immediately after they finish handling the money and to then apply hand sanitiser.

## **13. Microphones**

Microphones shall not be shared.

## **14. The wearing of masks**

Religious leaders and worshippers shall wear a mask / visor when entering a place of worship. It is however important that proper mask / visor hygiene is observed. Face masks should not be placed on young children under 3 years of age; anyone who has trouble breathing; or anyone who is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance. The mask or visor shall not be worn by the leader whilst delivering the sermon and the prayers.