

# COVID-19 Transitioning – Standards and Guidance for 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.

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

- 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 inside places of worship and during services;
- j) Provide ongoing cleaning and disinfection operations of the place of worship.

## Core concepts in COVID-19 transitioning

Faith and spirituality are important in the lives of people. It follows that in the transitioning phase of COVID-19, careful consideration needs to be given to faith-based places of worship and related faith-based services. A number of core concepts relevant need to be 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 exposure 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 inside places of worship and during services and observe proper mask / visor hygiene.

If coughing or sneezing cannot be helped whilst at the place of worship, however, worshippers 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 of personal hygiene. 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. Gatherings during indoor and outdoor worship services

**For worship services held indoors**, it is necessary to determine the maximum number of persons that can be allowed at any one time. Provided that masks or visors are worn at all times inside places of worship and during worship services, the maximum capacity at any one time shall be one person per 4m<sup>2</sup> of effective worship space. This number should be clearly displayed on the outside of the place of worship. This number must also respect 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.

**For worship services held outdoors**, the maximum number of persons that can be allowed at any one time should not exceed 300 persons. The maximum capacity at any one time shall be one person per 4m<sup>2</sup> of effective worship space. This number must also respect the 2-meter physical distancing required between persons, as well as to the specific physical features and layout of the place of worship. It is still recommended that masks or visors are worn during worship services held outdoors.

## 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 particles increasing the risk of transmission of coronavirus. It is therefore recommended that during worship services choir members maintain social distancing with one (1) choir member per four (4) square metres and a minimum distance of two and a half (2.5) metres from each other.

## **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. An adult person wearing mask or visor may go around the place of worship to collect any money or other form of donations in a basket / receptacle. Members of the congregation should drop their offer in this basket/receptacle without touching any part of the container. Alternatively, an offertory basket or other receptacle may be placed at a suitable location in the place of worship and 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/receptacle 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; on anyone who has trouble breathing; or on anyone who is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance. Persons with sensory issues (such as sensory processing disorders and or autism among others) should be considered on a case by case basis in consultation with the parent/guardian. A mask should be worn if it is well-tolerated, otherwise one should not insist as it would be counter-productive. The mask or visor shall not be worn by the leader whilst delivering the sermon and the prayers.