**NSW Health COVID-19 Guidelines for PCNSW Congregations**

**as at September 26, 2020**

Dear all,

We are now seven months into COVID-19 restrictions and are starting to receive questions that were contained in earlier Updates.

As a result, we have combined all current information into one set of guidelines that we hope you find helpful.

We will update these guidelines on an ongoing basis as restrictions change over time.

Please note that these changes relate only to churches in New South Wales, and our colleagues in the ACT will need to continue to refer to ACT Government Public Health directions.

Please do not hesitate to contact Jeof Falls on [jfalls@pcnsw.org.au](mailto:jfalls@pcnsw.org.au) or Peter Merrick on [pmerrick@pcnsw.org.au](mailto:pmerrick@pcnsw.org.au) should you have any questions or would like to offer points for improvement.

Grace and peace,

*Andrew Campbell* *Jeof Falls*

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Contents

[1. Maximum number of people in Places of Worship 3](#_Toc52049490)

[2. The Lord’s Supper 4](#_Toc52049491)

[3. Baptisms 4](#_Toc52049492)

[4. COVID-19 Safety Plan for Places of Worship 5](#_Toc52049493)

[5. Requirements for keeping records 5](#_Toc52049494)

[6. Hygiene and cleaning 6](#_Toc52049495)

[7. Hand sanitiser safety and children 6](#_Toc52049496)

[8. Youth Groups and Children’s Ministries 7](#_Toc52049497)

[9. Singing 7](#_Toc52049498)

[10. Wearing masks 8](#_Toc52049499)

[11. Use of church rooms or halls by external groups 8](#_Toc52049500)

[12. Use of church rooms, halls or church property by church groups 9](#_Toc52049501)

[13. Bible study and growth groups in private homes 9](#_Toc52049502)

[14. General NSW Health requirements and recommendations 10](#_Toc52049503)

[15. Food ministries serving the local community 10](#_Toc52049504)

[16. PCNSW website resources 12](#_Toc52049505)

[17. NSW Health website resources 13](#_Toc52049506)

# Maximum number of people in Places of Worship

* 1. **Religious services**

The maximum number of people who may attend a religious service or a gathering before or following a religious service cannot be greater than 100 people subject to the 4 square metre rule and registration as a COVID-Safe business.

* 1. **Are those leading the religious service excluded from the maximum number?**

Yes.

Clause 4 ‘Interpretation generally’ of the PHO states “(1) In calculating both the space available for each person on any premises and the number of persons on the premises, the following persons are not to be included in any calculations— (a) any person engaged in work on the premises”.

Work includes work undertaken by volunteers. The Safety Plan confirms this under Physical distancing: “Capacity must not exceed 100 people, or one visitor per 4sqm of space (excluding staff), whichever is the lesser”. Staff also includes volunteers.

Accordingly, church staff and volunteers involved in leading church services are not included in these maximum numbers, but care should be exercised so that we do not seek to take advantage of this exemption by swelling the numbers of ‘workers’ to conduct a service.

* 1. **Is the maximum number applied to each room in the church building or the whole building?**

The whole building.

Clause 3(2) of the PHO defines Place of Worship as meaning “a building or place used for the purpose of religious worship by a congregation or religious group”. NSW Health in its website <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/what-you-can-and-cant-do-under-rules#religious-gatherings-and-places-of-worship> states “the maximum applies to the whole of the venue, even where men and women worship in separate areas.”

* 1. **Is the maximum number applied to separate buildings?**

If a place of worship has more than one building on the premises, each building can have up to 100 persons (or 150 persons for a wedding) provided there is enough space to ensure one person per 4sqm, and:

1. each building has its own separate ingress/egress to the outdoors
2. staff and volunteers are designated to work in only one building
3. reasonable steps are taken to ensure staff, volunteers and congregants of each building do not interact with each other
4. services have staggered start and finish times
5. each building has its own COVID-19 Safety Plan and registers this through nsw.gov.au.

This exemption applies to churches that conduct completely separate church services across different buildings. It does not assume that the Minister, other staff or volunteers would move from service to service across buildings, or that the two groups would mix before or after the service.

In other words, so long as the people in each of the buildings are kept from mingling or mixing with each other at any time (including the requirement that services are to have different start and finish times) then up to 100 may be included in each building.

* 1. **Weddings**

The maximum number of people who may attend a wedding or a gathering following a wedding service cannot be greater than 150 people subject to the 4 square metre rule and registration as a COVID-Safe business.

This maximum excludes staff and volunteers leading or helping in the conduct of the wedding who are not ‘guests’ of the wedding.

People attending the service are required to supply their name and contact details so that they can be used for contact tracing.

* 1. **Funerals**

The maximum number of people who may attend a funeral or a gathering following a funeral service cannot be greater than 150 people subject to the 4 square metre rule and registration as a COVID-Safe business.

This maximum excludes staff and volunteers leading or helping in the conduct of the funeral.

People attending the service are required to supply their name and contact details so that they can be used for contact tracing.

# The Lord’s Supper

Elders should wear gloves and consider wearing a mask when distributing the elements.  Hands should be sanitised immediately before putting the gloves on. Keeping each individual’s portions of bread and wine/juice separate is the goal.  Sharing a common cup or loaf should not be an option.

While we cannot recommend any particular product, we have received positive feedback from regarding the product: [https://whole-in-one.com.au/](https://aus01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwhole-in-one.com.au%2F&data=02%7C01%7Cjfalls%40pcnsw.org.au%7C539f78f9e4ab49f8e26608d853a206bd%7Ce933eb9854984426b9580a5023e9fba0%7C1%7C0%7C637351302693564851&sdata=LusPEZzpjJhCQlnQpK4dKC%2BSliBicELmwpMk3%2Br0mE0%3D&reserved=0), or something similar may be worth pursuing.

We hope that you and the congregation can be encouraged and that the sharing of these sacraments is a joyful and enriching time irrespective of the limitations which we presently know.

# Baptisms

Ministers may conduct baptisms subject to taking care with hygiene and maintaining physical distancing during the church service.  A wonderful cause for celebration!

# COVID-19 Safety Plan for Places of Worship

All churches, irrespective of whether they have opened for religious services or not, should prepare and register a Safety Plan with NSW Health.

The reason for this advice is due to most churches being open at least for staff and volunteers although they may not be open to the public (for example, for livestreaming). While many of the actions identified in the Safety Plan may simply confirm the church is closed to the public, there are still several of the sections in the Safety Plan that relate to staff and volunteers working in the premises.

If a church does not have physical property and church services are conducted in a school, for example, we understand that the school will require you to complete and register a Safety Plan before you return to church services. In this sense, you are the external group that will be expected to complete and register a Safety Plan before you occupy the premises no different to us asking for such plans from users of our church premises and halls. If you believe this is not the case, please contact us.

The Safety Plan can be completed and registered by the Minister, Session Clerk or indeed whoever else has been informally delegated with the responsibility to complete it. No formal authorisation is required from Session, the Committee of Management or the General Office. Although, the person who completes the Safety Plan should collaborate with Session and/or Committee of Management to ensure that the stipulations made in the Safety Plan can be adhered-to by your congregation.

When it is completed, please register that you have a Safety Plan at [Register your business as COVID Safe | NSW Government](https://aus01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nsw.gov.au%2Fregister-your-business-as-covid-safe&data=02%7C01%7Cjfalls%40pcnsw.org.au%7C02b0fd56f18349ccba1808d82f99f8d3%7Ce933eb9854984426b9580a5023e9fba0%7C1%7C0%7C637311685696462710&sdata=6GQl%2FXSkgG4Vxa1Q5%2FhY6u0kPfafGpUPJlvwKtpbtq0%3D&reserved=0).

You do not need to lodge a physical copy of the Safety Plan with NSW Health or with Church Offices. You only need to retain it for inspection by an authorised officer of the NSW Government or a police officer as requested.

Please ensure that all external groups using church premises have registered their Safety Plan with NSW Health, and retain copies for inspection.

Churches with multiple sites will need to prepare and register a Safety Plan for each site.

Please note that you may need to update your church’s Safety Plan in the future as restrictions and advice changes. If your church has already registered as a COVID Safe business online and you update your safety plan, you do not need to register again.

# Requirements for keeping records

NSW Health guidelines are summarised below:

* Keep a record of the name and a mobile number or email address for all staff, volunteers, visitors and contractors, and the time they entered the church premises, for a period of at least 28 days.
* For households, one contact is sufficient to support contact tracing. Ensure records are used only for the purposes of tracing COVID-19 infections and are stored confidentially and securely.
* Encourage congregants and church staff to be aware of the COVIDSafe app and its benefits to support contact tracing if required.

# Hygiene and cleaning

* Adopt good hand hygiene practices. The following are good resources to have on display and should be followed:
  + <https://www.hha.org.au/component/jdownloads/send/5-local-implementation/75-poster-who-1?Itemid=0>
  + <https://www.hha.org.au/component/jdownloads/send/5-local-implementation/76-poster-who-2?Itemid=0>
  + <https://www.who.int/gpsc/tools/GPSC-HandRub-Wash.pdf>
* Ensure bathrooms are well stocked with hand soap and paper towels or hand dryers.
* If morning tea or supper is provided, please ensure that food is individually packaged for each person and we recommend that you use only paper cups. Distribute food hygienically, maintaining physical distancing and have plans in place to prevent mingling.
* Modify the serving of communion to avoid direct contact where practical. Where this is not practical, ensure hands are washed before and after each interaction with soap and water or hand sanitiser.
* Avoid sharing books, drinking cups or other shared objects used during the service such as collection plates.
* Clean frequently used indoor hard surface areas (including children's play areas) at least daily with detergent/disinfectant. Clean frequently touched areas and surfaces several times per day.
* Disinfectant solutions need to be maintained at an appropriate strength and used in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
* Staff are to wear gloves when cleaning and wash hands thoroughly before and after with soap and water.

# Hand sanitiser safety and children

Alcohol-based hand sanitiser is dangerous if ingested, particularly for children.

Safety tips for carers:

* store hand sanitiser products safely and out of reach of children.
* any use by young children should be under the supervision of an adult.
* be aware of imported products which may not be clearly labelled and may contain more toxic alcohols such as methanol that make the product more dangerous.
* washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds is a safe and effective option.
* if you suspect the child has ingested hand sanitiser, regardless of the quantity, call the 24 hour Poisons Information Centre on [13 11 26](tel:13%2011%2026) for first aid and monitoring advice. Have the container of the ingested product with you.

# Youth Groups and Children’s Ministries

* Youth Groups and Children’s Ministries can use church premises subject to the number of children and young people on the premises not exceeding one person per 4sqm of floor space or 100 persons (excluding staff), whichever is the lesser.
* Children and youth ministries should be conducted in accordance with the NSW Government guidelines on Schools and Childcare. Children do not need to follow strict adult physical distancing guidelines but should follow good hygiene practices. Leaders should continue to maintain 1.5m physical distancing from children where practical.
* Reduce mingling wherever possible and promote physical distancing. Where reasonably practical, ensure congregational members and church staff always maintain 1.5 metres physical distancing.
* Please remember that you will need to maintain a record of the name and mobile number or email address of every child and young person (or their parents or carers) involved in these ministries for a period of at least 28 days.
* Please ask and exclude church staff and youth participants who are unwell from the premises.
* Singing is not allowed at this time.
* Take measures to ensure drivers of courtesy vehicles minimise close contact with passengers where possible.
* Provide staff with information and training on COVID-19, including when to get tested, physical distancing and cleaning.
* Display conditions of entry (website, social media, venue entry).

# Singing

During religious services singing in groups (whether by choirs or by congregants) must not take place at this time, irrespective of whether singers are wearing masks.

The only COVID-Safe singing that is permitted as from 26 September is a small group of up to 5 people singing together in one area if all singers face forwards and not towards each other, have physical distancing of 1.5 metres between each other and any other performers, and 5 metres distancing from the congregation in front. Group singing of up to 5 people should only take place in a large, well-ventilated setting.

This extends to children and singing within family groups. We ask congregations to listen to the music or hum along.

Individuals involved in recording and livestreaming where no public is present on the premises are allowed to continue to undertake these activities so long as the musicians are exercising physical distancing between one another.

# Wearing masks

NSW Health is encouraging congregants to wear a mask during attendance at places of worship. However, while highly recommended, especially in areas where there has been community transmission, wearing a mask is not mandatory.

# Use of church rooms or halls by external groups

1. **External groups**

External groups can continue to use church premises subject to the number of people in the building not exceeding one person per 4sqm of floor space or 100 persons (excluding staff), whichever is the lesser.

* Ensure the group has completed and registered a COVID-Safety Plan for the activity and has it available for inspection.
* Ensure the number of people in the building does not exceed one person per 4 square metres of space (excluding staff).
* Ensure gym, recreation classes such as tai chi and pilates, dance classes and sport activities have no more than 20 participants, plus the instructor and any assistants, per space that complies with one participant per 4 square metres.
* There may be multiple classes in a room if there is sufficient space to accommodate this and the classes remain separate.

Ensure participants maintain 1.5 metres physical distance where practical. Ensure any spectators comply with 1.5 metres physical distance where practical, such as through staggered seating. Household contacts are

1. **Playgroups**

Playgroups can use church premises subject to the number of people on the premises not exceeding one person per 4sqm of floor space or 100 persons (excluding staff), whichever is the lesser.

* Ensure the playgroup has completed and registered a COVID-Safety Plan for the activity and has it available for inspection.
* Adopt good hygiene practices.
* Designate the internal and external spaces that each gathering will use.
* Record and store the contact details of those who attend.
* Clean the surfaces of the defined space(s) after each gathering.
* Communicate the arrangements and guidelines with parents/caregivers.
* Set up spaces and activities that enable 1.5m physical distancing to occur between adults, and between children and adults. For example, games involving physical contact between adults and children should be avoided. Games involving physical contact between young people are allowed. Enforce 1.5m distancing for leaders’ meetings.
* Implement drop-off and pick up procedures that minimise the opportunity for adults to congregate together.
* Wipe down all balls, equipment and toys used at the end of the gathering. You may choose to rotate equipment when running consecutive gatherings. Toys that cannot be cleaned and sanitized should not be used. (e.g. Play doh).
* Children’s books, like other paper-based materials such as mail or envelopes, are not considered a high risk for transmission and do not need additional cleaning or disinfection procedures.
* Restrict the swapping of phones and devices between all participants.
* Avoid handling physical objects that are not your own property such as Bibles and handouts and money.
* Ask participants to bring their own drink or water bottle and food. If food is provided, ensure that it is individually packaged for each person and use only paper cups.
* Distribute food hygienically, maintaining social distancing.

# Use of church rooms, halls or church property by church groups

The key consideration is whether physical distancing can be maintained.

Although the words "no mingling" are not used in the Places of Worship Safety Plan, the Plan does state that the church needs to "have strategies in place to manage gatherings that may occur immediately outside the premises, such as at the conclusion of services. This may involve suspending or adjusting the practice of greeting congregants as they arrive or depart to ensure appropriate physical distancing."

In other words, a men’s breakfast would be permissible if you can encourage congregants and visitors to stand at least 1.5m apart while they are chatting or be seated with appropriate physical distancing in place.

In this context, we see no reason for not having food at the event, although it is important to maintain good hygiene in doing so, for example not handling food without gloves. We suggest paper cups and pre-packaged food.

# Bible study and growth groups in private homes

The rules on gatherings remain the same: 20 guests inside the home and 20 for gatherings in a public place. However, as the home is a high transmission area, the NSW Chief Health Officer strongly recommends a COVID-Safe precautionary approach of limiting visitors to the home to 10 people as a general principle.

As private residences are not places of worship, there is no 4sqm rule applicable to gatherings in homes and there is no requirement to prepare a COVID-19 Safety Plan for gatherings in homes.

NSW Health in various faith forums has asked all faiths to respect the separation of the church/faith and its religious activities and those of the private household. The householder carries the risk and burden if a visitor contracts the virus or spreads the virus in the home. The Church carries that risk and burden when opening up a place of worship to the public. Accordingly, we ask that Bible studies not be advertised as church events.

Should a householder invite visitors to their home for bible study or to watch services, we encourage people to practice 1.5m social distancing and good hygiene at all times.

# General NSW Health requirements and recommendations

* Display conditions of entry (website, social media, venue entry).
* Reduce mingling wherever possible and promote physical distancing. Where reasonably practical, ensure congregational members and church staff maintain 1.5 metres physical distancing at all times, including in office or meeting rooms. Note that family members do not need to physically distance.
* Children and youth ministries should be conducted in accordance with the NSW Government guidelines on Schools and Childcare. Children do not need to follow strict adult physical distancing guidelines but should follow good hygiene practices. Leaders should continue to maintain 1.5m physical distancing from children where practical.
* Please continue to use telephone or videoconferencing for essential meetings where practical.
* Review regular deliveries and request contactless delivery and invoicing where practical.
* Have strategies in place to manage gatherings that may occur immediately outside the premises, such as at the conclusion of services. This may involve suspending or adjusting the practice of greeting congregants as they arrive or depart to ensure appropriate physical distancing.
* Coordinate with public transport, where reasonably practical, around strategies to minimise COVID-19 risks associated with transportation to and from the church if crowding on public transport may occur.
* Take measures to ensure drivers of courtesy vehicles minimise close contact with passengers where possible.
* Please ask and exclude church staff and congregants who are unwell from the premises.
* Provide staff with information and training on COVID-19, including when to get tested, physical distancing and cleaning.

# Food ministries serving the local community

This section relates to formal food ministries undertaken by a congregation for the community from September 18, 2020 until further notice.

1. **Community food ministries in the greater Sydney metropolitan area including the Blue Mountains and Central Coast Local Government Areas**:

* All community kitchens, dinners, breakfasts and the like that provide cooked food to groups **are to remain closed** for the time being.
* Prepackaged goods such as pantry staples may continue to be provided. The following must be remain in place to ensure there is no gathering of people beyond the current government restrictions and to reduce the number of people who have touched goods prior to distribution:
  + **Fresh produce may be provided.**
  + **Ideally, goods should be prepacked into a bag for collection.**
  + Goods must:
    - Be prepacked into the bag at least 72 hours before individuals collect the bag.
    - Goods in bags must then be placed in a convenient location for collection and not touched for the 72 hour period.
    - Individuals can be invited to collect a bag after that period. Ideally this should be across a wide period of time so that no groups are formed.

OR

* + - Be thoroughly wiped down with a good household cleaner by someone who has washed their hands and donned gloves before they clean the items.
    - Goods must then be placed in a bag and not touched again until they are collected.
    - Individuals can be invited to collect a bag after that period. Ideally this should be across a wide period of time so that no groups are formed.

OR

* + - Individuals may be allowed to select items from a pantry or shelf, however these items should only be handled by a food ministry worker who has washed their hands prior to donning disposable gloves. That is, the worker should pick up the selected item and pass it to the individual. Items should have been on the shelf, untouched, for 72 hours before distribution. The individual receiving the goods should only touch the bag that they are taking home.
* Frozen meals can be provided. While COVID-19 can survive being frozen it does not survive when heated over 70-74 degrees. The following must be implemented:
  + **Home cooked frozen meals cannot be provided**.
  + Frozen meals can be purchased from a retailer.
  + The freezer surfaces, especially the handle, should be regularly cleaned.
  + Frozen meals should be distributed by an individual who has washed their hands prior to donning disposable gloves, directly to the recipient

All persons involved in a food ministry must not have:

* Travelled from anywhere overseas in the last 14 days,
* Travelled from Victoria in the last 14 days (noting that there are arrangements for border towns),
* Attended any of the locations listed on the NSW government site here <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/latest-news-and-updates> -   
  please note that this list is updated regularly and should be checked at least daily,
* Had a fever in the last 14 days,
* Had acute respiratory symptoms (i.e. shortness of breath, cough or sore throat) in the last 14 days, or
* Had close contact with anyone who has been confirmed to have COVID-19 / Corona Virus in the last 14 days

1. **Community Food Ministries outside the greater Sydney metropolitan area, Blue Mountains and Central Coast LGAs**

* Kitchens, dinners, breakfasts and the like that provide cooked food to groups can reopen. Provision of pre-packaged, fresh food and frozen meals may be provided.

All persons involved in a food ministry must not have:

* Travelled from anywhere overseas in the last 14 days,
* Travelled from Victoria in the last 14 days (noting that there are arrangements for border towns),
* Attended any of the locations listed on the NSW government site here <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/latest-news-and-updates> -   
  please note that this list is updated regularly and should be checked at least daily,
* Had a fever in the last 14 days,
* Had acute respiratory symptoms (i.e. shortness of breath, cough or sore throat) in the last 14 days, or
* Had close contact with anyone who has been confirmed to have COVID-19 / Corona Virus in the last 14 days

1. **All food ministries**

Social distancing requirements as set by the government must be adhered to at all times.

For further information about what is required see [https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/what-you-can-and-cant-do-under-rules](https://aus01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nsw.gov.au%2Fcovid-19%2Fwhat-you-can-and-cant-do-under-rules&data=02%7C01%7Cjfalls%40pcnsw.org.au%7Cbc6191e063ad4b6c852e08d8313cf239%7Ce933eb9854984426b9580a5023e9fba0%7C1%7C0%7C637313485137444702&sdata=AoNeLlVcJ6DSJEuL3LkYT%2Bs7TmC0l0lEXFTLCEupgtw%3D&reserved=0)

General information from the NSW Food Authority can be found here [https://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/\_Documents/industry/donating\_food.pdf](https://aus01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F_Documents%2Findustry%2Fdonating_food.pdf&data=02%7C01%7Cjfalls%40pcnsw.org.au%7Ce11e2e517fce433ba9b408d84c0f9fb4%7Ce933eb9854984426b9580a5023e9fba0%7C1%7C1%7C637342977363055750&sdata=8LMWPPAtnUwr%2FmT%2B02Km7lTOe3YrNVeiYzgTU3XxlXk%3D&reserved=0)

# PCNSW website resources

* 1. **Frequently Asked Questions**, including copies of all previous Updates, can be found on our website: <https://pcnsw.org.au/covid19/>
  2. **Pulse eMag** can be found at: <https://pcnsw.org.au/the-pulse/>. As we have stopped printing hard copies of the magazine, please forward this link to all members in your congregation and invite them to catch up on all that is happening across our Church.
  3. **The PCNSW/ACT Facebook page**, which shares information from across committees and congregations, can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/presbyterianchurchnsw/>. This Facebook page captures posts from across various Presbyterian committee and congregation Facebook pages – check it out and please share it with family and friends.
  4. **Ministry & Mission** has a growing number of resources for healthy ministry and information on financial assistance which can be found at <https://mmpcnsw.org.au/covid19/>.
  5. **Jericho Road** has a range of COVID-19 resourcesat: <https://jerichoroad.org.au/>.

# NSW Health website resources

1. **Latest NSW Health updates:**

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/covid-19/Pages/latest-updates.aspx>

1. **What you can and cannot do:**

<https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/what-you-can-and-cant-do-under-rules>

1. **NSW Health Safety Plans:**

<https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/covid-safe>

1. **NSW Government COVID-19 Legislation:**

<https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/information/covid19-legislation>