



FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM ACSA COVID-19 TEAM ON SINGING IN CHURCHES

21 November 2021

Preamble

The Covid-19 pandemic is ever present in our community. As at November 2021, the country is at Lockdown level 1, with a transmission rate of 1,2%. The pandemic is considered to be “under control” at transmission rates of under 5%. While levels of infection are currently low, the natural behaviour of epidemics is that there will be surges of infection. In the case of Covid-19 these “waves” are driven by numerous factors, including viral properties (mutations), our behaviour in relation to close contact, congregate settings, adherence to hand hygiene, wearing of masks and venue factors such as ventilation.

The current low levels of infection is by no means an indication that we are out of the woods, and to drop our guard at this critical time will be to our detriment. There is the reality of a fourth wave – the timing and size of it depends on our adherence to preventative measures, viral mutation and levels of immunity.

Despite the reality of an epidemic, there are increasing calls for churches to be given permission to resume the practice of singing in the act of worship at church services. The reality is that within congregate settings, singing is a high risk activity and transmission of virus is more likely. This goes against our aim of reducing risk wherever possible.

The following are issues to be considered by church leadership *in the context of the higher risk of transmission*, when deciding on allowing singing at services.

General Principles

To the extent that we recognise that the pandemic is ever present, we have to continue with the following:

1. Take all measures to minimise infection – maintain social distancing, avoid congregate settings or manage the risks, maintain good hand hygiene, wear masks.
2. Vaccinate – aim to reach a minimum of 70% vaccination status (ACSA has set a target of 90%).

The following additional factors should be weighed in making a decision about singing at services:

- a. Current Stage of outbreak in the country, and in specific geographical area;
- b. Number of participants at services
- c. Risk profile of congregation

- d. Venue size and ventilation
- e. Extent to which risk can be mitigated at church venue

Current stage of outbreak.

As at the time of preparing the brief we are at the lowest lockdown level. For this reason, when transmission rates are below 5%, the guidelines for singing at church are being considered and proposed. As soon as transmission rates increase, churches should cease the practice of singing even before new guidelines are published.

Number of Participants at Service

Because singing is associated with further spread of the virus by droplet/airborne mechanisms, the distance between congregants should be increased to a minimum of 3m. This will mean smaller numbers at services, and additional services added per day to accommodate congregations. Alternately, singing can be limited to the choir only, if the choir can be separated with a minimum distance of 3m between members, and 3m from the nearest congregant, in a well ventilated area. Most important to note is that MASKS remain COMPULSORY and cannot be removed while singing.

Risk profile of congregation.

Congregations with a higher risk profile should not consider singing at services, and continue with recorded music / solo performances. The risk assessment will include:

1. Age of congregants. An older population is at higher risk. The risk are the age itself, as well as the higher prevalence of chronic diseases such as Diabetes, Hypertension, Cancer etc.
2. Vaccination status. A congregation below 70% vaccination status remains an at risk population. Every effort should be made to vaccinate our congregations. Below 70% vaccination status singing is not recommended.
3. Venue size and ventilation is discussed below.

Venue Size and Ventilation

Social distancing should increase to 3m if singing will take place. This means that smaller venues will drop below the recommended 50% or 250 persons indoors.

Poorly ventilated churches should not consider singing. Choirs should be in areas where there is good cross ventilation with open windows / doors.

In Summary:

1. Singing remains a high risk activity in congregant settings and can contribute to an event becoming a super-spreader event. The risk to all faith organisations is that if this occurs, then churches will be closed. The decision to sing should not be taken lightly.
2. General principles of hand hygiene and wearing masks continue and are compulsory.
3. Social distancing should increase to a recommended 3m. This may result in addition of services to accommodate congregants.
4. Venues must have good ventilation to reduce the risk of airborne and droplet spread of the virus.

5. Smaller venues and venues with poor ventilation should continue without singing / recorded music / solo performances.
6. As soon as the lockdown level is increased or the transmission of virus increases, singing should immediately be halted.
7. Encourage vaccination at a minimum of 70% of your congregation, try to reach 90%. Consider not singing if vaccination levels are low.

If a church is unsure about its risk, ask for help.

ACSA COVID ADVISORY TEAM