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**FROM:** KAREN PEARSON **cc:** Distribution list attached

**DATE:** 17 JUNE

**TO:** PS FIRST MINISTER  
PS DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

**SUBJECT:** Discussion with Faiths Leaders on Covid-19 Restrictions

**Issue:** Ministers have invited Faiths Leaders and representatives to a discussion on the current restrictions on places and acts of worship.

**Timescale:** Immediate – meeting is scheduled for today at 12.00.

**Press Office Advice:** Given the considerable public interest in the reopening of places of worship, this meeting would be of significant interest to the media and faith communities.

**FOI Implications:** Potentially disclosable

**Financial Implications:** N/A

**Equality Implications:** N/A

**Legislative Implications:** n/a

**Executive Referral:** n/a

**Recommendation:**

**That you :**

- **note the list of participants attached at Annex A; and**
- **note the suggested opening lines and briefing attached at Annexes B and C.**

## **BACKGROUND**

1. FM and dFM have invited Faiths Leaders and representatives to a discussion today. The main objectives are:
  - To engage with the Faiths community on the current restrictions on places and acts of worship;
  - To take their views on what preparations are needed to enable places of worship to reopen;
  - To assess whether the Faiths community need guidance;
  - To enable decisions to be taken by the Executive, including whether indicative dates could be provided (this is the subject of Executive business on 18 June); and
  - To thank the Faiths community for the support they have provided in their local communities since lockdown.

## **DETAIL**

2. NICVA have assisted with the logistics. At the time of submitting this advice, 15 invitees have agreed to take part in the Zoom meeting at 12.00 today. Participants are listed at Annex A.
3. The First Minister and deputy First Minister may want to open with an outline of the meeting. Suggested opening lines are at Annex B. Covid has impacted on the religious festivals for all Faiths in NI including Easter. Passover, Eid, Vaisakhi and Ridvan have also been impacted since lockdown and Annex C sets out brief information for these.

4. The invites were issued as per the list provided by the Private Offices. NICVA advise that there have been some queries about attendance, and there is a risk that some will feel left out. I would suggest:

- The meeting is described as representative of the faiths here
- Is intended to be inclusive and mindful of diversity
- We establish a mailbox for other thoughts to be sent in

## **RECOMMENDATION**

5. That you:

- note the list of participants attached at Annex A; and
- note the suggested opening lines and briefing attached at Annexes B and C.

Drafted by **KAREN PEARSON**

## **Copy distribution**

**HOCS**  
**Peter Toogood**  
**Peter May**

Name Redacted

**Neill Jackson**  
**Chris McNabb**

Name Redacted

**ECCMC**

**ANNEX A: First Minister and deputy First Minister, meeting with Faiths Leaders**  
**12.00 Wednesday 17 June**

**Attendees:**

- Rev Trevor Gribben (Presbyterian Church in Ireland)
- Father Tim Bartlett (Roman Catholic Church)
- Rev Dr Heather Morris (Methodist Church in Ireland)
- Canon Shane Forster (Church of Ireland)
- Dr Nicola Brady (Irish Council of Churches)
- Edwin Graham (Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Belfast)
- Shane Whelehan (Quaker Service)
- Rev Philip Dunwoody & Rev Robert Robb (Reformed Presbyterian Church)
- Rev Gordon Dane & Alastair Hamilton (Free Presbyterian Church)
- Rev David Kale (The Belfast Hebrew Congregation)
- Nicola Brady (Irish Council Of Churches/Inter-Faith Forum/Community Faiths Forum)
- Neil Young (Causeway Coast Vineyard Church)
- Name Redacted Department for Communities)

## **ANNEX B: Suggested Opening Lines**

### **First Minister**

Thank you for making time to join us today.

We wanted to talk to you about the impact Covid has had on your communities and on your places of worship.

We also want to thank you for the support you have provided to your communities since lockdown. We are conscious that many of the main religious festivals were severely impacted since 23 March, including Easter, Eid, Passover, Vaisakhi and Ridvan.

The Executive has lifted some of the restrictions and we will want to do more as soon as it is safe to do so.

We would appreciate your advice and thoughts on the preparation time you need, the steps you have and can take to support the lifting of restrictions, and how we bring all that together for a discussion in the Executive.

### **deputy First Minister**

Thank you for meeting with us. We are conscious of the impact and we want to hear from you.

We will want other people and organisations in the Faiths community to share their views with us and we will establish an arrangement for that.

We are also mindful of the situation for funerals and we want to assure you that we are giving thought to that too.

And to add my thanks for all you are doing in your communities. I'm sure there are people out there who wouldn't have got through without the help and support you provide.

We want this to be an open conversation so tell us what you think but we would like to suggest a focus on:

- the steps you might want to take towards re-opening places of worship;
- the lead in time you would need, and how you would manage that safely ;
- what might need to change for you, in terms of numbers attending, for example, cleaning routines; and
- whether there is anything we can do to help

## **ANNEX C: Background information on religious festivals in NI impacted by Covid-19**

### **Vaisakhi**

Vaisakhi, or Baisakhi, is a religious festival in Sikhism and Hinduism, usually celebrated on 13 or 14 April each year (April 13 in 2020). In the Sikh tradition Vaisakhi principally commemorates the founding of the Khalsa religious community in 1699, the representatives of the Guru on earth and the collective body to which devout Sikhs are initiated at puberty. Vaisakhi also marks the celebration of the Solar new year for many Hindus and is traditionally celebrated as a harvest festival in the Punjab and other parts of India

Sikhs traditionally celebrate Vaisakhi with worship in specially decorated Gurdwaras (temples), followed by colourful 'nagar kirtan' street processions complete with chanting and dance before an evening meal with family and friends. Hindus customarily mark Vaisakhi with ritual bathing in sacred rivers, visiting temples to offer special thanksgiving pujas (prayers) and by participation in special fairs and dances.

Covid-19 forced the cancellation of public celebrations of Vaisakhi in the UK and throughout the world, with the event marked privately within homes and online, including the streaming of prayers and communal celebrations over Zoom and social media.

### **Passover**

Passover or Pesach is one of the most important Jewish religious feasts that occurs between 15th and 21st/22nd days of the Hebrew Month of Nisan (8-16 April 2020). Passover remembers one of the founding events in Jewish history: the Hebrews' liberation from slavery in Egypt and the "passing over" of the forces of destruction, sparing the first born of the Israelites.

Passover is marked with various dietary observances and ceremonial rituals, including the cleaning of the home to remove any traces of chametz (leaven). The centrepiece of the Passover feast is the seder, a family meal during which foods of symbolic significance commemorating the Hebrews' liberation are eaten and prayers and traditional recitations performed.

For social and historical reasons Passover celebrations have traditionally focused on the home, with families often travelling great distances to be together. Covid-19 thus forced many families to celebrate seder together online, with local communities organising to ensure the elderly and self-isolating had access to traditional Passover supplies.

## **Eid al-Fitr**

Eid al-Fitr, (*Eed-ull-fit-r*; 'Festival of Breaking Fast') is a festival that signifies the end of Ramadan, celebrated during the first three days of Shawwal, the 10th month of the Islamic calendar (23-24 May 2020). The smaller of the two great Islamic holy festivals, Eid al-Fitr signals the end of the Ramadan, a month of ritual observance marking the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad during which Muslims are required to fast from sunrise to sundown.

Eid al-Fitr features two to three days of celebrations, beginning with morning prayers and the traditional greeting of "Eid Mubarak," (Blessed Eid). A public holiday in most Islamic countries, Eid is marked by events including the preparation and eating of festive foods, gift giving, charitable donations and visiting friends and family.

In recognition of the infection risk posed by religious gatherings, Eid celebrations were constrained by Covid-19 restrictions, with many Muslim countries imposing 24 hour curfews, travel bans and the closure of holy cities to prevent mass celebrations and family reunions, with face gatherings and social distancing mandated where limited public observance was permitted.

## **Ridvan**

Ridván (paradise) is a twelve-day religious and historical festival in the Bahá'í Faith, celebrated from sunset 21 April to sunset 2 May. The festival marks Bahá'u'lláh's 1863 proclamation that he was the manifestation of God and is named for the Garden of Ridván outside Baghdad, where Bahá'u'lláh stayed for twelve days after the Ottoman Empire exiled him from the city. It is the holiest festival in the Bahá'í religious calendar.

Ridvan is celebrated by Baha'is across the global with special meals and community activities, including prayers and religious elections, ideally held outside in garlanded tents. Work and school is prohibited on certain days during this period.

Communal celebration of Rivdan was severely restricted due to Covid-19, with outdoor gatherings replaced by virtual events conducted over Zoom or social media. For the NI based Bahá'í community, planned celebrations in South Belfast were moved online, with communal singing, readings, "tea, coffee and happiness".