

## Coronavirus: Guidance on church worship

### Introduction

The UK Government's [Guidance for the safe use of places of worship](#) published 29 June 2020 indicates that from 4 July, church buildings in England may be used for the following purposes, but only if measures for the safe use of the building are in place:

- Worship services and events with attendance determined by social distancing requirements.
- Weddings with up to 30 attendees.
- Funerals with up to 30 attendees.
- Private prayer.

If the capacity of a building prepared for social distancing is less than thirty, then the maximum number of attendees at a wedding and funeral is reduced accordingly.

Please note that in Wales, the devolved Government's [Guidance on Re-Opening Places of Worship](https://gov.wales/guidance-reopening-places-worship-coronavirus-html) (<https://gov.wales/guidance-reopening-places-worship-coronavirus-html>) published 23 June does **not** allow church buildings to be used for general worship services. The guidance restricts the use of church buildings to:

- Weddings where all attendees, except those from the same household and the couple themselves, maintain 2m social distancing. However, register offices may not yet be open and anyone planning a wedding should check.
- Funerals where attendees are invited and where all attendees, except those from the same household, maintain 2m social distancing.
- Private prayer.

In Wales, for both weddings and funerals, the maximum number of attendees is determined by those responsible for the building, namely the trustees. They will have to ensure social distancing and other safety requirements can be met.

Some things are explicitly prohibited in all cases as follows:

- Congregational and choral singing.
- Sharing food or drink, though see on communion below.
- Anything that brings those from different households closer together than 1m, except for during an emergency and when brief closer contact is necessary to facilitate an essential act of worship. This might include communion, but please see below. **Please note that the ideal distance remains at least 2m** between those from different households. Between 1m and 2m is acceptable only when 'mitigations' (extra measures) are in place, such as face coverings. Though not demanded by Government guidance, we recommend that face coverings are used by all those attending church regardless of the distancing, as this will give

attendees enhanced confidence in their safety in church. Young children and those with respiratory conditions are excluded from this as in all cases where face coverings are otherwise expected.

- Any contact between people such as handshakes, hugs or the laying on of hands.

The requirements for the safe opening of church buildings are extensive. Our own summary of these requirements can be found in our leaflet [Coronavirus: Guidance on re-opening Baptist church buildings](#). You **must** consider these requirements before opening your building.

This guidance below aims to help you think through the wider issues of gathering for worship. We recommend these issues are discussed carefully among church trustees alongside the Guidance on Re-Opening Baptist Churches. **Above all, we encourage you not to rush to re-establish gathered corporate worship but only to do so prayerfully and after the widest possible consultation.**

If you usually meet in a school or alternative community facility, there is some Government [guidance for the safe use of multi-purpose community facilities](#) How this advice applies to churches meeting in community facilities is not entirely clear. We recommend that if you wish to meet again for worship, you should follow the guidance in this document and in our guidance on Re-Opening Baptist Church Buildings, where it is relevant. As hirers of the community facility, issues around building maintenance are for the facility's management, not the church. You will need to speak to the facility's management so that you may work within their requirements also.

If you are thinking of worshipping outside, but still within the boundary of the church grounds, you should seek to apply all relevant sections of both this guidance and the guidance on Re-Opening Baptist Churches Buildings. If you hope to meet outside but off church premises, say in a park, then gatherings can be no more than two households or six people from different households.

## Some guiding principles

1. **Give priority to the safety of both church membership and the community.** Any gathering carries a risk of spreading COVID-19. Proceeding with caution and diligence is an act of ongoing care towards those who are vulnerable to the disease. This approach also protects the reputation of the church within the community.
2. **Be sensitive to the needs of all those who will be affected by your decisions.** While some will feel both ready and keen to return to church for worship, many will not. Some continue to live with the fear of the disease. Others have suffered the trauma of being bereaved, witnessing multiple deaths, losing jobs, or living in lockdown in very difficult family circumstances. Others are exhausted from the demands placed upon them. For more information on what to expect as a community emerges out of a crisis, you might find it helpful to watch our webinar on [The Life Cycle of an Emergency](#). Be aware that if worship services start again in church, some might feel under pressure to attend, or to return to their volunteer position even when they wish not to. Do not assume that the readiness felt by a few is shared by all. You may of course have to actively discourage a few who are keen to return, for example where they share a house with a clinically vulnerable person. You are not responsible for the decisions of others, but you should enable wise choices wherever possible.
3. **Be Baptist in your decision-making.** Consult as widely and as prayerfully as possible. Ask your congregation what they feel, as well as other building users and even those who live near the church. Listen well to their hopes, fears and practical concerns. A church-wide survey may be a good starting point.

4. **Do not be afraid of NOT returning to using the building.** We have seen a remarkable explosion of creativity that has enabled churches to maintain worship, fellowship and witness. We have discovered that we can still express the reality of being Christ's body through online meeting platforms, phone, letters, and small, socially distanced gatherings. It is not the same as everyone gathering physically – it is just different. Do not hesitate to continue with these alternative ways of being church if you feel unprepared or unwilling to meet once again in a building. If you would like to think more about what the church is when it gathers digitally rather than physically, please see our recent webinar called [The Church Gathered and Scattered](#). In it, Prof Paul Fiddes makes a case for what he calls a 'Zoom Ecclesiology.'
5. **Accept this is a marathon not a sprint.** You have time. Resist the sense of urgency to re-open, or the need to keep up with other churches who take a different course of action. Work to ensure that whatever you decide as the best way forward is sustainable. Try to avoid anyone having to carry an unrealistic burden, whether that be the minister, the deacons responsible for fabric, cleaners, technical teams and so on. Many Baptist churches have for example already decided not to open until at least September, giving them time to plan.
6. **Accept uncertainty.** None of us know what the future looks like. You may have to experiment and then change your approach. We are all learning to trust God more and accept that our understanding is limited.
7. **Communicate clearly with your church.** Tell them what is now permitted, what is still disallowed, what is planned, and what is expected of worshippers. Be clear that worship in church buildings will for some time look different to what we are used to. There will be fewer worshippers, no singing, different ways of celebrating communion and baptism, and everyone might be wearing face coverings. You should spell out this reality to your church as you consult with them. Good communication will save later disappointment or the embarrassment of having to correct people when they are at church.

## Whole church worship

Our [Coronavirus: Guidance on re-opening Baptist church buildings](#) covers the safe use of buildings in all circumstances. In addition to reading this, here are some questions to consider before re-establishing gathered corporate worship:

Have you:

Asked the church if they want to be together in the building?	YES/NO
Asked the church when they would like this to happen?	YES/NO
Asked the church to express their concerns about re-opening?	YES/NO
Compared a list of advantages and disadvantages of re-opening?	YES/NO
Worked out whether all those who wish to attend can, and if so, how?	YES/NO
Considered who might be excluded?	YES/NO

Spoken to those who are shielding about how they will be included?	YES/NO
Ensured you have the people to enable safe re-opening of the building?	YES/NO
Made the whole church aware what is not permitted?	YES/NO
Told the church what they will need to bring, for example their own Bible?	YES/NO

In all the above, be aware that there is likely to be a wide range of expectations within the church. People will pull in different directions, towards and away from risk. Again, careful consultation and comprehensive communication will be important.

If after all these questions, you do decide to re-open for worship, care should be taken not to create a division between those who can attend and those who can't.

Those who must not attend include:

- Anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19.
- Anyone who is self-isolating because of possible or actual COVID-19 in their household or because they have been told to do so by NHS Test and Trace. There is an exception for funerals – see below.

Those who might not attend include:

- Those who are shielding, whom the Government have advised but not demanded stay away from places of worship.
- Those who remain fearful of catching or passing on the disease, for example if they work on the frontline in the NHS, or who have a vulnerable person in their household.
- Those for whom a different format of service creates difficulties, for example those with children whose groups are not yet meeting.

To address this potential division, some churches are considering combining live and streamed services. Though possible, combining both in one event can be technically demanding and the format for one does not easily fit with the other. You will also need the permission of anyone in the live service if they are going to appear on the streamed service online. However, if you do follow this route, you might consider how those still at home can be included. Can you, for example, use a chat box for them to join in prayers? Can they take part in readings or testimonies on the screen?

Other churches are considering holding separate live and streamed services. Here, the issue is the workload involved in the additional service.

Another option is to repeat a live service at a different time for those who are at increased risk of severe disease from COVID-19, which includes those over 70. It may be a relief to them to know they will be worshipping only with others who are taking extra measures to avoid the disease.

The Government asks that lives services do not include any choral or congregational singing. Solos are permitted, but only when this is "essential to an act of worship", and when the singer is screened or sufficiently distanced from other worshippers. Instruments may be used, including an organ but not including any wind or brass 'blown' instruments. The guidance also recommends services are short. Given the stripped-back service that will result, you should consider how to make the best of the format. A reflective style of service may be helpful. Pre-recorded video interviews, testimonies or readings could be used. Or you can project a live preacher from anywhere in (or outside) the country.

Perhaps the most difficult time to manage will be before and after the service. The welcome greeting will have to be re-thought. After-service mingling must be discouraged. Please consider how this will work in your building and make sure everyone attending is clear about the expectations.

## Communion

It feels particularly important right now to express our unity, remember Jesus' suffering on our behalf, and recall the hope of death defeated, through sharing bread and wine.

However, communion poses a particular problem and Government guidance is strict. Bread and wine cannot be passed from person to person. And we do not recommend worshippers collect bread and wine from stewards. Nevertheless, brief proximity with a person distributing communion is permitted. We suggest for Baptist churches the guidance means:

- Any bread and wine the minister lifts symbolically or speaks over should be separate from the bread and wine that is distributed.
- Those distributing bread and wine should wash their hands immediately prior to distribution or wear gloves.
- Pre-prepared pieces of bread can be dropped into the hands of those receiving.
- Small wine cups can be lifted from trays and placed in the hands of those receiving.
- At all times, there should be no contact between those distributing and those receiving, and no contact between those receiving and any plate, basket or tray.

As an alternative, pre-packaged individual cups of juice with a sealed pocket on top for a wafer are available. These could be placed on chairs before the service, though we note the environmental cost of single-use plastic.

Though it is possible to ask worshippers to bring their own bread and wine to a service, care should be taken. It risks a painful breach of the symbolism of unity if some forget to bring any. A service in which only a percentage can take the bread and wine would be in conflict with the very meaning of communion.

Given all this, you may wish to continue celebrating communion by sharing bread and wine in your own homes whilst being led online, if this has been your recent pattern. Or, those who are not digitally connected could agree to follow a set liturgy, posted to each member, at a certain time. It can be a comfort to know that the words in the liturgy are being led concurrently by a minister or other church leader. If small groups of up to six church members are gathering outside for fellowship and prayer, communion might be shared here too.

## Children in worship services

In live services, young children should remain with their parents or carers. Though it is possible to hold separate children's programmes, the Government are asking that such groups comply with their [guidance on education and childcare](#). This is not easily translated into the church setting. It is the principles rather than the detail that you will have to apply. You might consider it easier to ask children to remain with parents and carers. Services should then take into account their presence throughout.

Shared toys and books have to be put away and indoor play areas closed, though outside play areas may remain open, as outlined in our [Guidance on Re-opening Baptist Churches](#).

## Weddings

All the above comments on whole church worship will apply. Additionally, the following ought to be considered.

- In England the number attending a wedding service has been capped at 30. This includes the couple and all those facilitating the service.
- Services are to be shortened to cover the basics of the ceremony. We suggest this minimum to be the legal requirements plus the additional vows, Bible readings and prayers that affirm that this is a marriage before God.
- The social distancing guidelines of 2m distance between households or 1m where extra protective measures are taken still applies to everyone except the couple. This includes the minister from the couple. It includes any bridal party procession in or out of the service.
- Rings should be brought to the ceremony by the couple themselves.
- It will not be possible for hands to be laid on the couple during prayers.
- For signing registers, all signatories must wear disposable gloves or wash/sanitise their hands immediately before using the pen. This is because the pen and ink are of a particular type and so the same pen has to be used by all signatories. Signatories apart from the couple should remain sufficiently distanced from each other.
- Mingling of guests on the church premises must be discouraged.
- Though outside the remit of this guidance, please note that large receptions are still forbidden. Any reception can include only those from two households, or consist of up to six people from different households if held outside.

Given these constraints, we again encourage you to be creative in thinking how best to celebrate weddings. Can others be included by digital means? Should you plan a later service of thanksgiving, perhaps including the reaffirmation of vows?

Please see the separate wedding attendee allowance for churches in Wales noted towards the top of this guidance.

## Funerals

All the above comments on whole church worship will apply. Additionally, the following ought to be considered.

- In England, the number attending funerals in churches is capped at 30. This includes all those facilitating the service except for funeral director staff.
- The coffin cannot be carried by mourners.
- We believe open coffins are not permitted, though you should check this with the funeral director.
- We recommend there are no ceremonies around the coffin or body, such as filing past the coffin to pay respects.

Funerals should still be brief and focus on the committal. Given this, it may be easier to use crematoria chapels or go direct to the graveside rather than use a church building. This keeps to a minimum the risks to mourners and funeral staff that are inherent with social interaction and movement between locations. The maximum number of mourners permitted at crematoria is determined by each crematorium and you should check with the funeral director.

The guidance for funerals around those who are self-isolating or shielding are different to that for general worship. A person who is self-isolating may attend a funeral, but not at the same time as a person who is shielding because they are 'extremely clinically vulnerable'. The same is true vice versa. Anyone in either category who wishes to attend should therefore tell the service organiser.

If people from both groups wish to attend, it will be a matter of discussion between the service organiser and the family as to which is given priority.

Live streaming, if possible, will enable more people to participate. Alternatively, you can record a reading, prayers, eulogy and message beforehand and make this available to those not present, so they 'share' in the service as it takes place. It can also be offered to anyone wishing to listen in later. You can also produce a leaflet that contains all the above written within it. A service sheet to commemorate the person who has died may still be printed. You can then print the text of the service inside or add it later and send the leaflets round to all those not present.

Please see the separate funeral attendee allowance for churches in Wales noted towards the top of this guidance.

## Baptisms

Baptisms by full immersion are not permitted. Government guidance says that only "small volumes [of water] can be splashed onto the body."

Such a reduced use of water strips away much of the symbolism of baptism that we are familiar with. We will be questioning the Government on this matter as we wish to suggest that baptisms should be permitted when the person being baptised and the person baptising is from the same household or household 'bubble'. This would not stop the minister or another church leader from leading the baptism liturgy and praying for the candidate from the appropriate distance.

In the meantime, we ask you to refrain from using full immersion in a church. There may be other ways of baptising a person outside of church. For example, among a small gathering of up to six people outside. Again, the person baptising and the person being baptised should be from the same household or household 'bubble.' Others could 'join' the event online. Even the service leader could be involved remotely. This could be in a suitable outside body of water or, if in a garden, by effusion (water poured over the candidate.) Though full immersion has always been considered by Baptists to carry the fullest symbolism of participation in the burial and resurrection of Jesus, effusion has often been employed when immersion is not possible. In effusion, the cleansing by much water and the kneeling and standing of the candidate can echo the symbolism of full immersion.

## Private prayer

Churches buildings may open for private prayer, as has been the case for a while. Individuals or a group from the same household may use the building for prayer but are discouraged from social interaction with others. All the advice on use of the building, social distancing and hygiene in our guidance on opening churches must be adhered to. Aids to prayer such as books or prayer sheets must be either brought and taken away by the worshipper or be single-use and disposed of by the worshipper.

## Care for yourself

We are not unaware of how demanding and perhaps demoralising some of these restrictions are. We also understand that the earlier total ban on meeting was easier to manage than the situation we now face. Leaders may well be in the firing line for criticism from those who disagree with decisions being taken, or who are angry at the toll the pandemic is taking on life and society in

general. If you are a minister or other church leader reading this, do make sure that you proceed at a pace that you are comfortable with and which will not demand of you more than you can give. And please pray for, listen to and be vocally supportive of each other within your leadership teams through what continues to be an exceptionally challenging season.

Ministries Team

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This is one of a series of Guidelines that are offered as a resource for Baptist ministers and churches. They have been prepared by the Baptist Union of Great Britain and are, of necessity, intended only to give very general advice in relation to the topics covered. These guidelines should not be relied upon as a substitute for obtaining specific and more detailed advice in relation to a particular matter.

The staff at the Baptist Union of Great Britain at Baptist House will be very pleased to answer your queries and help in any way possible.

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