

Coronavirus: Guidance on church worship

Version (most recent first)	Changes
10 June 2021	Changes in Section 2 to allow 30 people to gather outdoors (50 if for church worship), and extended households of up to three households indoors, in Wales. Clarification added to the top of the table in Section 2 about how children count towards the number limits. Correction in Section 3 to advice for those shielding. Expansion of guidance in Section 6 regarding hospitality. Clarification added to Section 8 regarding wedding receptions on church premises.
27 May 2021	Clarification in Section 8 about whether a service of thanksgiving is a funeral or a 'commemorative event'.
20 May 2021	Changes throughout to recognise that in England up to 6 people from different households may gather indoors; 30 outdoors; 30 for most life events; and as many as social distancing permits for funerals. Change to Section 2 to note that in Wales, up to 50 people may gather outdoors; and 30 for wedding receptions and funeral wakes indoors. Comments added in Section 6 about refreshments indoors.
13 May 2021	Changes in Section 2 so that in Wales, outdoors singing is now permitted, and from 17 May, maximum group size outdoors will be 50.
6 May 2021	Changes in Section 2 so that in Wales, organised children's activities, wedding receptions with up to 15 people, and funeral wakes with up to 15 people, may all take place indoors. Addition in Section 3 of suggestions about safe singing.
29 April 2021	Changes to Section 2 so that worship, wedding receptions and funeral wakes may take place outdoors for up to 30 people in Wales; Addition to Section 2 of expected changes in Wales from 3 May; Addition to Section 2 of guidance on offerings which was previously in our guidance on re-opening church buildings.
22 April 2021	Addition to Section 5 of comments regarding creche facilities; Addition of new section, Section 6, on hospitality before or after worship.
15 April 2021	Document re-structured. Changes include: In England, the following are now allowed: supervised children's groups indoors, prayer and bible study groups on church premises, and up to 15 people at weddings, wedding receptions outdoors, and funeral wakes. In Wales, indications about forthcoming changes have been made.

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1. Sources

This guidance is based on a number of Government guidance documents:

UK Government

[Guidance for the safe use of places of worship](#)

[COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021](#)

[COVID-19: Guidance for small marriages and civil partnerships](#)

[COVID-19: Guidance for wedding and civil partnership receptions and celebrations](#)

[COVID-19: guidance for arranging or attending a funeral during the coronavirus pandemic](#)

[COVID-19: suggested principles of safer singing](#)

[COVID-19: Guidance for the safe use of multi-purpose community facilities](#)

[COVID-19: What you can and cannot do](#)

[Covid-19: Meeting friends and family](#)

[Protective measures for holiday and after-school clubs, and other out-of-school settings](#)

[Working safely during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – performing arts](#)

[Working safely during coronavirus \(Covid 19\) – restaurants, pubs, bars and takeaways](#)

Welsh Government

[Guidance on re-opening places of worship](#)

[Current restrictions: frequently asked questions](#)

[Guidance to local authorities and places of worship on solemnisation of marriages the forming of civil partnerships and alternative wedding ceremonies](#)

[Guidance for weddings and civil partnerships: receptions and celebration events](#)

[Guidance on funerals: COVID 19](#)

[Safe use of multi-purpose community centres \(COVID-19\)](#)

[Organised children's outdoor activity: frequently asked questions](#)

[Business closures: current restrictions](#)

[UKH hospitality guidance for Wales](#)

You may also find the following BUGB guidance helpful:

[Coronavirus: Guidance on re-opening Baptist church buildings](#)

[Coronavirus: Children's, youth and families ministry](#)

[Coronavirus: Advice for ministers – pastoral visiting](#)

2. What is allowed

Many churches have begun or are planning to hold in-person worship and other gatherings. However, none should feel pressured to do so and, in light of the still significant levels of cases and risk posed to the community, it is also quite reasonable to stay closed at this stage. We continue to encourage churches to consider carefully their own context and take the decisions that are appropriate for their own local circumstances.

The table on the following page shows our interpretation of what is permitted at the time of writing and what UK and Welsh Governments have said **may** happen in the coming months. Subsequent sections give more details.

Please note that the Government guidance is constantly changing and at times contradictory. If you feel there are discrepancies between their guidance and the table or text below, please email ministries@baptist.org.uk and we will do our best to respond.

What is currently permitted In every case below, it is assumed that social distancing is practised and that any church building has been made 'Covid-secure'		
Activity	England Generally, children should be counted when considering the number limits listed below.	Wales Generally, children under 11 do not count when considering the number limits listed below.
Communal worship on church premises including bible study and prayer groups	Yes, indoors, for as many as social distancing permits. Attendees must only socially interact in sub-groups of up to six people or two households. Yes, outdoors, for as many as social distancing permits. Attendees must only socially interact in groups of up to 30.	Yes, indoors, for as many as social distancing permits. Yes, outdoors for up to 50 people.
Private prayer on church premises	Yes, for as many as social distancing permits, but please see notes below.	Yes, but please see notes below.
Congregational Singing	No, indoors. Yes, outdoors, but please see notes below.	No, indoors. Yes, outdoors.

Worship bands and singers	Yes, including small groups of singers, though the number of singers should be kept to a maximum of six.	Yes, up to 15 people who must meet and rehearse in sub-groups of up to 6.
'Blown' wind or brass instruments	Yes	No
Prayer and bible study groups at home	Yes, indoors at home for up to six people from different households. Yes, outdoors at home for a group of up to thirty people.	No, indoors at home, unless the group is made up only of those from an 'extended household' of up to three households who meet together exclusively. Yes, outdoors at home for a group of up to thirty people.
Supervised activities for children	Yes, both indoors and outdoors.	Yes, both indoors and outdoors
Communal worship off the premises	Yes, outdoors for up to 30 people.	Yes, outdoors for up to 50 people, but only up to 30 people in a private garden.
Wedding ceremonies	Yes, up to 30 may attend not including those working.	Yes, for as many (invited) people as social distancing permits.
Wedding receptions	Yes, outdoors for up to 30 people including in private gardens. Yes, indoors for up to 30 people in a Covid-secure venue, but not in a private home.	Yes, outdoors for up to 50 people in regulated premises, but not in a private garden. Yes, indoors for up to 30 people in regulated premises, but not in a private home.
Funerals	Yes, for as many as social distancing permits.	Yes, for as many (invited) people (close family and friends only) as social distancing permits.
Funeral wakes (defined in Government guidance as 'commemorative events')	Yes, for up to 30 people indoors in a Covid-secure venue, or outdoors.	Yes, outdoors for up to 50 people in regulated premises, but not in a private garden. Yes, indoors for up to 30 people in regulated premises, but not in a private home.

Government plans for the coming weeks

These are indications only which may aid planning. You must check guidance again as each change date approaches

England

21 June 2021

All limits on social contact and all limits on life events might be removed, but we wait to hear from the Government on 14 June. Even if a further easing goes ahead, please note that this does not necessarily mean that indoors gatherings will be free of restrictions.

Congregational singing

We are often asked when congregational singing will again be permitted indoors, as the road map makes no mention of this. We continue to work through Churches Together in England to make representation to the Government and await to hear what they will advise.

Wales

No upcoming changes are currently publicised.

3. Communal worship

For churches that decide to meet in-person for general worship, weddings or funerals:

- **Social distancing should be 2m wherever possible.** In England, if 2m is difficult, 1m plus measures such as face coverings or meeting outdoors, is permitted. However, we suggest this 1m+ allowance should not be applied when people are next to each other for a period of time, such as during worship itself.
- **Face coverings are mandatory indoors in England and Wales in churches** except for: children under 11; those exempt on medical grounds; and those leading worship from the front whether throughout a service or briefly for the delivery of, say, a bible reading. In England, staff members and those working on their behalf need not wear face coverings, but we encourage a safety-first approach and ask staff to wear them also when others are present. Face coverings are not mandated for worship outdoors, but you may consider it a wise precaution to ask worshippers to wear them.
- **Social interaction should be kept to a minimum.** In England, social interaction between attenders at services, prayer meetings and bible study groups should only take place between sub-groups of people as outlined in the table above. The general mingling of people that would usually happen before or after services is restricted to these groups. In Wales, there is no such expectation on limited social interaction, but there is a stricter requirement in Wales to maintain 2m distance between people from different households at all times.
- **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. Anyone who is shielding does not have to stay away, but is advised by Government to take extra precautions.
- **Congregational singing is allowed only as indicated in the table above.** Where singing is permitted, it is recommended singers are seated in order to ensure social distancing. Even when singing outdoors, it is wise to limit the number of songs sung and the volume of the singing as both duration and volume may increase risk of Covid-19 transmission. Anyone with symptoms suggestive of COVID-19, or who are known to have been in recent contact with others who have COVID-19, should not participate.

Please note that UK Government guidance suggests, “when worship takes place outdoors, the congregation may join in with singing in multiple groups of up to 30. Congregation members should continue to follow social distancing rules.” We don’t fully understand what the Government have in mind when they refer to singing in multiple groups of 30. We suggest the principle is that singing may take place outdoors as long as everyone is social distanced. Social interaction (before or after the service) should only take place within groups of up to 30.

- **Worship bands and amateur choirs may perform only as indicated in the table above.**
- **Playing wind or brass ‘blown’ instruments is allowed only as indicated in the table above.** Pipe organs may be played as long as the organist is physically distanced from anyone else and there is a plan in place to clean the instrument after use.

- **Private prayer may take place on church premises only as indicated in the table above.** The UK Government guidance is confusing on this topic, but we suggest that in England, as many people may individually use the premises at the same time for private prayer as social distancing permits. In Wales, permission exists for “prayers led by a minister of religion or lay person,” but private prayer is not mentioned. Given the freedom to meet generally for worship, we assume that using the building for private prayer would also be allowable.
- **Worship off the premises may occur only as indicated in the table above.** We recommend that if you plan any events outdoors and off the premises, you speak to both the local authority and the police beforehand. You will be responsible for ensuring the space conforms to Covid guidelines.
- **Food and drink may not be shared** during worship except for communion, though please see Section 6 below on refreshments before or after the service.
- **Hymn books and bibles may not be shared.** If you have the facility, please use projection equipment to display any bible readings, liturgy or song and hymn words. In Wales, Bibles and hymn books are to be removed from use and worshippers should bring their own. In England, if church copies must be used, they should be quarantined for 48 hours after use. Alternatively, single-use service sheets with all the necessary words can be left on each chair by someone who has washed their hands immediately beforehand. Service sheets should be taken away at the end by each worshipper.
- **Offerings should be made by bank transfer or online giving wherever possible.** If cash or cheque offerings are collected during a service, please provide a plate or box into which offerings can be placed without having to touch or pass round the receptacle. We recommend these offerings are either handled using disposable gloves or isolated for 72 hours first. A contactless card terminal may be used to take payments, although you should provide antibacterial wipes to clean the terminal after each use.
- **Any contact between people is best avoided**, such as handshakes, hugs or the laying on of hands. In England, friends and family meeting indoors in groups of up to six and outdoors in groups of up to 30 may make their own decision as to whether to be in close contact with each other. However, the UK Government’s guidance continues to recommend caution and that social distancing remains in place between different households wherever possible. We suggest it is appropriate that this recommendation is followed at church until such a time that social distancing restrictions are lifted entirely.
- **Services should be shorter rather than longer.** To minimise the time people spend in the company of others, the Governments recommend services should be conducted “in the shortest reasonable time.” We recommend that what is ‘reasonable’ ought to take into account the well-being of the church members and attenders such that their emotional and spiritual needs can be met.

4. Communion

Bread and wine cannot be passed from person to person. 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. They should wear face coverings.
- 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.

We do not recommend asking worshippers to bring their own bread and wine to a service, as the unity symbolised by communion will be undermined if some do not bring their own.

Communion may of course be shared in virtual services where worshippers prepare their own bread and wine at home.

5. Children in worship services

Whether children's groups may meet is set out in the table above. More detail may be found in our guidance on [Children's, Youth and Families ministry](#).

Though never specifically mentioned in UK or Welsh Government guidance on places of worship, we assume creches may meet, especially as both parent and child groups and supervised children's activities are permitted. However, the approach you take will depend on whether these youngest of children are left in the care of creche volunteers or whether, alternatively, parents have to remain with them. Please see Section 4 of our children's, youth and families' guidance for more on this.

6. Hospitality before or after worship

In both England and Wales, hospitality spaces may open indoors and outdoors which we suggest means refreshments may be served indoors and outdoors before and after a service. However, you will have to follow the UK Government's guidance on restaurants, pubs, bars and takeaway services or similar advice in Welsh Government guidance (please see their frequently asked questions). The requirements are extensive and include at least the following.

- Those served indoors would have to be seated in groups of not more than six people or two households, with appropriate distancing between tables.
- Those served outside may sit in groups of up to thirty – they should be seated whilst consuming food or drink. Given that 30 people are unlikely to be able to converse in one group, you may find it easier to ask people to stay in smaller groups.
- Tea and coffee could either be served to the table or collected from a counter in which case consideration should be given to queueing and perhaps a screen at face height. Perhaps one person only from each table could collect drinks.
- You should record those on each table for test and trace purposes.
- Hand sanitisers should be used by all who attend.
- Surfaces and furniture would need to be cleaned regularly and between each group of table users.
- Those serving will need to be socially distanced from each other wherever possible and/or wear face coverings to protect others.

- Background noise should be kept to a minimum so that no-one has to raise their voices.

7. Weddings

Whether weddings and wedding receptions are permitted and how many people may attend is outlined in the table above. The number permitted does not include anyone who is working, such as the minister, photographer or premises manager. We also suggest that a small worship team would not be included in the number. However, please do not give people 'roles' so they can be counted as working and thus increase the numbers attending.

- Services should be shortened to cover the basics of the ceremony. We suggest this minimum to be the legal requirements, additional vows, Bible readings, short address and prayers that affirm that this is a marriage before God.
- Social distancing guidelines apply to everyone except the couple. This includes the minister from the couple. It includes any bridal party procession in or out of the service. In England, there is some relaxation of the need to distance from friends and family who may choose to be in closer contact with one another. However, we recommend that attendees are asked to maintain social distancing whilst in church to be consistent with all other activities on church premises.
- Guests have to wear face coverings. In England, the bride, groom and minister do not. In Wales, the minister does not, but the couple are also expected to wear face coverings except during the procession, the vows, and the first kiss.
- 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 or marriage schedules, 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.
- Receptions on church grounds with shared food should operate in line with UK Government guidance on restaurants, bars and takeaways, or UKH hospitality guidance for Wales.

8. Funerals

Whether funerals and funerals wakes (what the UK Government call 'commemorative events') are permitted and how many people may attend is outlined in the table above. The number permitted does not those working such as the minister or funeral staff.

- Face coverings must be worn by all except the service leader and anyone called to the front to speak.
- Social distancing should be observed at all times.
- The coffin cannot be carried by mourners.
- We recommend there are no ceremonies around the coffin or body, such as filing past the coffin to pay respects.
- We recommend open coffins are avoided as Government guidance asks mourners to avoid anyone being in close contact with the deceased (without wearing PPE). We suspect this would be hard to ensure if the coffin was open.
- If the committal for close friends and family takes place just before a service of thanksgiving, we suggest that the service of thanksgiving is legitimately seen as the 'funeral' for the sake of maximum numbers permitted, despite the absence of the body during the service. But if a service of thanksgiving takes place on a separate day to the committal altogether, the service should be seen as a 'commemorative event' for the sake of the maximum numbers permitted.

It is a legal offence for anyone who is self-isolating to attend a funeral unless, in England they are a close family member of the deceased, or in Wales they are a family member or close friend.

However, those who are self-isolating who are close family members of the deceased in England, or family members or close friends of the deceased in Wales may attend as long as they are not symptomatic, though it is strongly recommended that they do not. In particular, we suggest that those who are self-isolating because they have tested positive themselves should stay away. No-one who is self-isolating may attend a commemorative event, such as a wake or ashes scattering under any circumstances.

Those who are 'clinically extremely vulnerable' may attend a funeral, but again, this is discouraged.

Anyone who does decide to attend even though they are either self-isolating or 'extremely critically vulnerable' must inform the service organiser. Those self-isolating must wear a surgical grade face covering and other mourners must be told of their status. A plan should be in place to keep those self-isolating away from those who are 'clinically extremely vulnerable.'

9. Baptisms

Where baptisms take place, they are treated the same as, or rather should be part of, communal worship. Whether communal worship can take place at all is outlined in the table above.

In England, baptisms may take place as part of a general worship service. A number of baptisms may take place in the same baptistry water as long as only one candidate is in the baptistry at any one time. The candidate should remain socially distanced until the moment of immersion. At this point, the person baptising the candidate may approach them and place their hands on their head to immerse them. They should not touch the candidate in any other way.

We suggest therefore that:

- the person baptising waits in the water whilst the candidate makes the baptism promises;
- the person baptising speaks the words declaring their intent to baptise the candidate;
- the candidate then enters the water and kneels;
- the person baptising places their hand(s) on the candidate's head to immerse them by moving their head forward and down.
- The candidate exits the pool.
- The person baptising sanitises their hands and repeats the above for any further candidates.

We suggest the more usual pattern may be followed if the person baptising is from the same household as the candidate.

In Wales, only one person may be baptised per session. The only person who may enter the water with the candidate is another from the same household, in which case the baptism can proceed in the usual fashion.

In all cases:

- Make sure that anyone who undertakes baptising another for the first time is given careful instructions about how to do this – where to position themselves; how to hold the candidate, and so on.
- Allow only those from the candidate's household, if present, to lay hands on them to pray for them.
- Allow only someone from the candidate's household, if present, to hold their towel, dry clothing and so on.

- Ensure any rooms used for changing are cleaned straight afterwards and before the room is used by anyone else.
- Ask the candidate to securely contain and remove as soon as possible any wet clothes and towel.

Baptisms in a swimming pool or in public water such as a river or sea are possible, subject to general government permission for gatherings in public places. The requirements regarding who may baptise the candidate would also remain.

We also suggest that candidates could be baptised by affusion, in which water is poured over the candidate. This could be done with the candidate kneeling either in a church baptistry or outside. In this case, the person baptising the candidate would approach only once the candidate has knelt. After water is poured over them, the person baptising would move away before the candidate stands. Care should be taken to avoid splashing others with the water. If done in this way, we suggest that the person baptising does not need to be a person from the same household as the candidate.

10. Other life events

In England, other life events, if they take place within a general service of worship, should be treated in the same way as any other worship service with the maximum number dependent only on how many can be safely accommodated with social distancing. If they take place as a standalone event, attendees are limited to a maximum of 30 people.

In Wales, other life events may take place with the maximum number dependent only on how many can be safely accommodated with social distancing, whether the event is part of a general worship service or not.

The most obvious example is child dedications. Social distancing would need to be maintained at all times including between parents, godparents and the service leader unless they are from the same household. Children being dedicated should be held by or remain with their parents throughout the ceremony.

11. Prayer and bible study groups

Whether small groups may meet on church premises for prayer or Bible study is shown in the table above. Where they are permitted, they should follow the rules for communal worship. This means that in England, if indoors, interaction between people for the sake of prayer or Bible study is permitted, but social interaction is limited to within groups of up to six from different households. Clearly, the distinction between devotional interaction and social interaction is blurred and not easily defined. The important thing is to minimise the risk of Covid-19 transmission. Participants will in any case have to wear face coverings, unless exempt. We additionally suggest that there should not be so many people that voices have to be raised for all to hear. We appreciate that the use of face coverings makes this difficult, and so alternatives may prove more inclusive, such as: all discussion going through a chairperson with a microphone; or lecture-style bible studies; or more reflective-style prayer meetings.

Whether small groups may meet in people's homes for prayer or Bible study is also shown in the table above. Where they are allowed to meet, they are subject to the general guidance for meeting people socially in homes or gardens and not under guidance for places of worship. Nevertheless, in order to keep people safe, we recommend thought is given to the following:

- Attendees should still be socially distanced – 2m or 1m plus face coverings if indoors. We realise this may mean few homes will have a room large enough for a meeting.

- Staggered arrival and exit times.
- Asking attendees to bring their own refreshments.
- Cleaning of all surfaces that are likely to be touched before and afterwards.
- Providing easy access to hand cleansing facilities.

12. Principles to consider

As restrictions ease and you consider changes to the way you worship together, you may find the following principle helpful in your deliberations.

Give priority to the safety of both church membership and the community. We continue to encourage churches to be exemplars of care and concern for the vulnerable within your congregations and your wider communities. The vulnerable are not only those susceptible to serious illness from Covid-19 but also those who will be disproportionately affected by the requirement to self-isolate. This includes key workers, children and young people in education, those living alone, and so on. This priority should be reflected in all your planning.

Be inclusive. Please pay careful attention to those who might be excluded or unfairly treated by the patterns of meeting you are exploring. In your planning, ask how you will continue to reach those who may not have the same freedom to participate as others. If you have been meeting digitally and this is still the best way of including the greatest number of people, it may still be inappropriate to meet in person.

Think missionally. Please think whether those in your community know how to access the church if they wish to. Does your website or noticeboard say how digital services may be accessed? Are there instructions about reserving a place in a physical service if booking is required? In other words, how can those searching for refuge, meaning and comfort right now access a worshipping community who will point them to the resources of Jesus?

Consider sustainability. Whatever form of meeting you decide upon, whether virtual or in-person, the burden for delivering church worship may fall on a few people – ministers who have to lead multiple consecutive services; stewards who have to organise people movement; cleaners whose job is so greatly expanded; tech teams who have to stream services. Please plan so that your way of meeting is sustainable, even if, for example, this means not meeting every Sunday.

Accept limits. Some church leaders have been put under pressure from members as frustration rises with the ongoing restrictions on our freedom to worship. This is an understandable and predictable response as patience wears thin. Try not to allow yourself to be pressured into doing what will cut across the above four principles. Accept that, yes, there are limits on church life that are costly and painful to endure. You cannot resolve all issues.

Communicate well. Be clear with your church and any other visitor about expectations, what is and is not possible, how to access and contribute to worship.

Ministries Team

This version: 10 June 2021

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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