

COVID-19 Advice on the Conduct of Public Worship

Issue Date	Version	Issued by
12 th January 2021	2.8	The House of Bishops Recovery Group
Update on version 2.8: on the 5 th January a new national lockdown came into effect. This document has been revised to reflect the new restrictions. Please note the change to the singing and music guidance in particular (18). Additional guidance has been added about providing lifts to those travelling to worship and with seating arrangements for those with mobility impairments (8 and 21).		

The Recovery Group has been set up to support the Church of England as government guidance changes through the COVID-19 pandemic. This document has been prepared with information available by the issue date. It will be kept under review and updated as the situation develops, with each update issued as a new version. The current version will always be available to download from the Church of England website via the [Coronavirus FAQs page](#).

“I was glad when they said unto me, “let us go to the house of the Lord.”” (Psalm 122 v1)

This guidance should also be read in conjunction with advice on cleaning and on detailed guidance for conducting services such as Holy Communion, baptisms, weddings and funerals available [here](#).

The guidance below has been adapted from published [Government Guidance](#) for use by the Church of England.

For other denominations who use Church of England buildings to meet for worship we ask that adhere to the same advice (where relevant) including conducting their own risk assessment and ensuring compliance to physical (social) distancing, Public Health hygiene practices and guidance on music and singing for example.

Salient points

- There is an exemption from the Government’s gathering limits that covers places of worship making it possible for more people to gather for acts of communal worship.
- Following discussions with government we have advice that a service to mark a ‘significant date in the Faith calendar’ can happen with attendance up to the Covid safe capacity of the building even though it is not a regular weekly or monthly service. This means that annual celebrations or commemorations or services to mark special dates can go ahead.
- Government guidance permits a maximum of 30 people to attend church premises for a funeral. Small weddings with up to 6 people in attendance can also go ahead in exceptional circumstances. This is subject to the church carrying out a risk assessment and taking all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of coronavirus. All other life event services, such as baptisms, ordinations and confirmations, are subject to the same rules as normal public worship in determining the attendance limit.
- There is no numerical limit on other services, subject to physical distancing and Public Health requirements being met.

- The two-metre ‘rule’ applies for public worship except in situations where closer contact cannot be avoided; extra Public Health precautions must then be taken.
- Consideration should be given to keeping numbers below the permitted maximum to further minimise risk.
- Wearing of face coverings by all those attending a place of worship, including ministers and worshippers, where there may be other people present is **mandatory**. There are exemptions to this, including for those leading a service, detailed in our guidance on face coverings.
- While those at extra risk and the ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ should be advised of the risks of attending public worship, a *decision* to do so is theirs alone.
- Government guidance includes a request for names of attendees to be recorded and kept for 21 days to assist ‘track and trace’ if required. See our guidance document for more information. .
- Singing is permitted where it is essential to an act of worship and should be limited to one person wherever possible. Exceptionally, where it is essential to the service, up to three individuals should be permitted to do so. Strict physical distancing should be observed, and the use of Plexi-glass screens should be considered to protect worshippers, and each other. See our FAQ on singing for more information.
- Detailed instructions on ‘consumables’ suggest that services of Holy Communion can be held if specific guidance is followed, including the continued suspension of the Common Cup (see the guidance document on Holy Communion).
- Public worship guidance includes surrounding grounds (including churchyards, car parks and courtyards); meetings in other places should follow other guidance for people meeting in public spaces.
- Refreshments are not permitted to be served in places of worship unless for take-away or delivery.

Detailed Questions and Answers

1. Do we have to open our church building?

No, there is no requirement to open. You should only open if you consider it safe to do so. Canon law continues to require that the usual services should be held; but ministers and PCCs can resolve to dispense with those requirements for a short period, or for a longer period by agreement with the bishop (see Annex below for a note on this).

All clergy are encouraged to consider continuing to stream worship or other events, both to avoid large gatherings and to continue to reach those individuals who are self-isolating or particularly

vulnerable to COVID-19 as well as to those who have joined worship for the first time online during the lockdown period.

Whatever is decided, please consider how to communicate this to your congregation and community.

2. What is considered as a place of worship?

The government has defined a place of worship as follows:

‘A place of worship refers to a building used for regular religious ceremonies, communal worship or similar gatherings by religious organisations. It includes the use of surrounding grounds, for example, adjoining car parks, courtyards or gardens for which the venue managers are also responsible.

The guidance also covers premises when being used for religious gatherings, even when their primary purpose is not for religious gatherings, such as a community centre. These premises will only be able to be used where they are permitted to be open and additional guidance may be applicable.

This guidance does not cover public parks, private homes, cultural sites or other open spaces, such as woodlands which may be used for religious purposes. If people do want to engage in worship in these spaces, then the guidance relevant to that place should be adhered to.’

3. How should I go about preparing the church?

You should undertake a risk assessment to look at your own situation, as each church building and the local practices there are different. A template can be found [here](#).

4. How many people can attend services?

For communal worship, including led prayers and devotions, limits should be decided locally on the basis of the capacity of the place of worship, following a risk assessment. There is a maximum number of 30 attendees for funerals and 6 for weddings.

5. How can we assess the number of people who can attend communal worship or other services?

You should undertake a local risk assessment to gauge the capacity of the building, allowing for safe entry and exit points and communal areas. The number of people permitted to enter at any one time should be limited to ensure at least 2 metres (or 1 metre with risk mitigation where 2 metres is not possible) between households. The sorts of things to consider include:

- Size and layout of the building, including ventilation
- Total floor space, pinch points, busy areas, entrances and exits, and where possible alternative or one-way systems should be used.
- Travel to and from the church building – whilst it may be possible to safely seat a number of people in the building, it may not be safe for them all to travel to and from, or enter and exit, and so numbers may need to be reduced to allow for this.

- What other venues are open locally and whether to stagger entry times with other venues to avoid queues or congestion in surrounding areas.
- Travel routes and whether it may be necessary to consider one-way travel routes, including between transport hubs and churches.

6. How can we maintain physical (social) distancing?

This needs to be addressed as part of the risk assessment. Things to consider include:

- For frequently used places, mark areas using floor tape to help people to maintain physical distancing. If your floor surfaces are historic or delicate even so-called ‘temporary’ adhesive products can cause damage if they are left in place for an extended period. Advice is normally available from the manufacturer’s website.
- Consider additional mitigations such as: avoiding face to face seating, reducing the number of people in any one area, improving ventilation, using protective screens and face coverings as appropriate, closing non-essential social spaces, one way flow, staggering arrival and departure times to avoid congestion at entrances and exits including such things as exiting one row at a time, using alternative rooms to separate worshippers.
- Queue management to reduce congestion and contact.
- Clear signposting or assistance with sufficient “stewards” to help maintain compliance. Example posters to help with this can be found [here](#).
- Those leading worship reminding worshippers of the need for physical distancing and hygiene.

7. Should we ticket services?

It may be necessary for some parishes or cathedrals to introduce a booking system to help with managing numbers, particularly where demand will be high.

8. Can I give a lift for someone to get to the service?

Yes, it is advised that people use their own cars where possible transporting themselves, their household or support bubble but it is permitted for lift to be given so that someone can travel to worship. Precautions about seating, good ventilation and face coverings are recommended. There is guidance about giving someone a lift [here](#).

9. Do we have to keep a register of who attends our church buildings?

This is not mandatory, but in line with other government guidance for other venues you are advised to keep an accurate temporary record of visitors for 21 days, in a way that is manageable for your church, and assist NHS Test and Trace with requests for that data if needed for contact tracing and the investigation of local outbreaks.

Read out [guidance on using test and trace](#) for more information.

10. What about hygiene?

On entering and leaving the church building everyone, including staff and volunteers, should be asked to wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and water or to use hand sanitiser if hand washing facilities are not available. There should be signs and posters on safe hygiene practices. You should provide hand sanitiser in multiple locations in addition to toilet facilities.

11. Can we open our toilets?

Toilets should be kept open if possible and carefully managed to reduce the risk of transmission. The following steps will usually be needed to make the use of toilets as safe as possible:

- signs and posters about safe hygiene. [Download our notices or order prints here](#)
- physical distancing marking in areas where queues normally form, and the adoption of a limited entry approach, with one in, one out (whilst avoiding the creation of additional bottlenecks).
- If possible, make hand sanitisers available on entry to toilets where safe and practical, and ensure suitable handwashing facilities including running water and liquid soap and suitable options for drying (either paper towels or hand dryers) are available. Communal towels should be removed and replaced with single use paper towels.
- Agree clear use and cleaning guidance for toilets, with increased frequency of cleaning in line with usage. Use normal cleaning products, paying attention to frequently hand touched surfaces, and consider the use of disposable cloths or paper roll to clean all hard surfaces. Special care should be taken for cleaning of portable toilets and larger toilet blocks.
- Keep the facilities well ventilated, for example by fixing doors open where appropriate and safe to do so.
- Putting up a cleaning schedule that is kept up to date and visible.
- Providing more waste facilities and more frequent refuse collection.

12. What about those worshippers who are over 70 or clinically vulnerable, those who may have symptoms, and those self-isolating?

Certain groups of people may be at increased risk of severe disease from COVID-19, including people who are aged 70 or older, regardless of medical conditions. Individuals who fall within this group are advised to stay at home as much as possible and, if they do go out, to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside of their household. You may want to consider whether, based on your local circumstance, you have set times when churches are open solely for those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, such as those over 70 or clinically vulnerable.

Those who are considered to be extremely clinically vulnerable to COVID-19 will have been advised to shield and are currently advised not to meet more than one person from outside of their own household, and therefore not currently advised to attend places of worship.

Anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19 (a new continuous cough, a high temperature or a loss of, or change in, their normal sense of taste or smell) should not attend the place of worship due to the risk that they pose to others; they should self-isolate at home immediately with other members of

their household. Remote participation should be considered, for example by live streaming. This applies equally to individuals who work at the place of worship.

Where individuals are self-isolating due to a possible or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the household, or because they have been requested to so by NHS Test & Trace, they should participate remotely. See stay at home [guidance for households with possible or confirmed COVID-19](#).

Guidance is different for funerals, see [guidance on managing a funeral during the coronavirus pandemic](#).

13. What about children and young people attending worship?

We warmly welcome all children and young people; they are part of the worshipping body of Christ. Young children should be supervised by the parent or guardian and appropriate hygiene precautions followed.

Separate children's activities being organised by the place of worship are not permitted at this time unless they are supporting vulnerable children.

Any shared facilities for children, such as play corners, soft furnishings, soft toys and toys that are hard to clean, should be removed and/or put out of use.

Where young people or children are coming unaccompanied then we would advise consulting [Safer Environment and Activities](#) from the National Safeguarding Team and adding a safeguarding assessment as part of the overall risk assessment for opening, particularly sections 1.3 on risk assessment and 2.10 on young people who attend church activities without their parents.

If you are collecting data for NHS Test and Trace the details of the parent or guardian of an accompanied young person or child need only be collected.

For unaccompanied children or young people aged 13 years old or over, they can be asked to provide their details and sign the consent form, or make an individual booking where consent is required. You may need to explain to them the purpose for which the data is being collected so they understand what Test and Trace is about, rather than relying on them reading and understanding the privacy notice on their own.

15. What about cleaning the church building?

If you only have one service a day, then it would be sensible to clean the church after the service. If you are having more than one service cleaning the whole church may not be possible. In this case, we suggest wiping down those surfaces that are likely to have been touched, paying particular attention to those frequently touched surfaces. You will need to ensure you have identified people to undertake the cleaning. A decision should be made locally on how frequently cleaning should take place based on an assessment of risk and use of the building. If the church is not going to be used for 72 hours there is no need to clean it. For further guidance on cleaning see [here](#).

16. Can we use communal service sheets and hymn books etc?

It is best not to use communal service sheets or books that can be touched repeatedly by different individuals, and which may be difficult to clean. Individual service sheets should not be handed out at the entrance as this is likely to breach physical distancing. However, they may be placed on pews/seats before the service, and then taken home by worshippers.

Alternatively, people could print off their own service sheets and take them home afterwards. Similarly, people should be encouraged to bring their own bibles and take them home with them. In circumstances where worshippers cannot bring their own books, churches should keep a selection of clean books for individuals to use. Clean books should be quarantined for 48 hours since their previous use and should be quarantined for 48 hours again after use.

17. Can the organ be played?

Yes. Organs can be played for services, practice and general maintenance, but should be appropriately cleaned after use.

18. Can we sing?

The Government has advised that:

- Where singing or chanting is essential to an act of worship, this should be limited to one person wherever possible. Exceptionally, where it is essential to the service, up to three individuals should be permitted to do so. Strict social distancing should be observed and the use of Plexiglass screens should be considered to protect worshippers, and each other.
- Communal (congregational) singing should not take place indoors or outdoors. This applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are used.

Under the Performing Arts guidance professional groups may continue to rehearse and train, and perform for broadcast or recording purposes. The numbers or people involved should be kept as small as possible to minimise risks and participants should follow social distancing guidance.

Please see [Government guidance on places of worship](#) and on [Performing Arts](#) for more information.

The Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) has produced more detailed resources on singing and music, which can be found [here](#).

19. Can our worship band play?

Non-professional musicians except for those leading worship are not permitted at this time. Please see the above guidance for singing and the Governments [performing arts guidance](#). The number of musicians leading worship should be kept to a minimum and instruments that are blown into should be avoided.

20. Can we use microphones/PA systems?

Yes, if you have one then you should make use of it. Ideally individual lapel microphones or static (fixed) microphones should be used rather than hand-held, and those using them should not touch the microphone to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus, especially if it is a fixed microphone – for example on a lectern - that will be used by multiple people through a service. Lapel microphones should only be touched by the person using them and should be cleaned (for example with alcohol wipes) or left-untouched for 48 hours between uses.

If you are considering installing new or additional audio-visual equipment you can [find guidance here](#).

21. What about seating arrangements?

People from the same household or “bubble” can sit together. Everyone else will need to observe appropriate physical distancing at all times. It may be helpful to remind people as they enter, and to supervise this if needed.

When entering and leaving church particular care needs to be taken that there is no mingling between households/support bubbles. This can be particularly hard for people to do when encountering friends and clear paths for entrance and exit need to be considered as well as stewarding where this is considered to be an issue.

Please note also with this that those who have impaired mobility will need longer to enter and exit and due consideration needs to be given so that they can do so without increasing risk to them or feeling that they are under pressure to move more quickly.

22. Should people wear face coverings?

Face coverings are currently mandatory on public transport and in a range of indoor venues including Places of Worship and church halls. While there are exemptions (please see our [guidance document on face coverings](#)) **this is a legal requirement**.

Those who are leading services or events in a place of worship, and those who assist them (for instance by reading, preaching, or leading prayer) do not always need to wear a face covering, although one should be worn especially if physical distancing cannot be maintained.

These exemptions are made to enable communication, particularly with those who rely on lip-reading, facial expressions or clear sound; they do not exempt clergy and other leaders from wearing face coverings in other situations or during other activities.

23. Can we pass a collection plate during the service?

Where possible cash donations should be discouraged. Where this is not an option, cash should be collected in a receptacle that is set in one place and handled by one individual, as opposed to being passed around. Regular cleaning and hygiene should be maintained, and gloves worn to handle cash offerings where giving continues.

24. Can we serve refreshments?

Hospitality spaces within a place of worship, such as cafes, are permitted to open but should be limited to service for consumption off the premises. Social distancing should be observed, and with minimal staff and customer contact in line with the [hospitality guidance](#).

25. Can we process in church?

Yes, as long as physical distancing is maintained.

26. What if someone becomes unwell whilst in a church building.

If anyone becomes unwell with symptoms of COVID-19 in a church building they should go home immediately and be advised to follow the stay at home guidance. If they need clinical advice, they should go online to NHS 111 (or call 111 if they don't have internet access). In an emergency, call 999 if they are seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk. They should not visit the GP, pharmacy, urgent care centre or a hospital.

Other people who may have been in contact with the person who has become unwell should wash their hands thoroughly after the interaction, but they do not need to take any other specific action unless they develop symptoms themselves or are advised to do so by NHS Test and Trace. If they do develop symptoms they should follow the stay at home guidance.

The church should be cleaned in line with Government [guidance](#) where a suspected case of COVID-19 has been recorded.

26. What about other Christian groups that use the church building for worship?

Other groups must undertake to conduct their own risk assessment and observe physical distancing and Public Health guidance.

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