

Coronavirus: Guidance on church worship

Version	Changes
27 August 2020	Complete re-write of guidance document to reflect the number of churches now meeting for live services and further clarifications from Government.
10 September 2020	Minor revisions throughout reflecting UK Government's changes to social interaction guidance so that no more than 6 people from different households may socially interact whether indoors or outdoors. Note that each person should still remain physically distant from anyone from another household.
17 September 2020	Changes in What is Allowed, and in Weddings in light of face coverings becoming mandatory in Wales.
24 September 2020	Clarification of rules regarding Worship Outdoors; Change to Weddings to note reduction in England of the number permitted from 30 to 15; Clarification of rules for England and Wales regarding small groups in Prayer Meetings and Bible Study.
25 September 2020	Correction to Weddings to make clear that anyone working (minister, photographer, organist, premises manager, for example) is not included in the cap of fifteen people; Correction to What is Allowed to clarify the number of singers and the use of wind instruments.

Introduction

Churches will by now be familiar with the UK Government's [Guidance for the safe use of places of worship](#) and the Welsh Government's equivalent [Guidance on re-opening places of worship](#).

Many Baptist churches are continuing to meet online only and have not returned to physical meetings. Others have started to experiment to discover the best ways of holding live services. And many churches have started to use their buildings and outdoor premises for other allowed purposes, such as community support, prayer meetings, children's groups and so on.

We are aware that some churches are intending to review what they offer in September now that it is clear that restrictions on our style of worship seem likely to continue through the autumn at least.

This provides an opportune moment for us to revise this guidance with the aim of facilitating those churches who wish to increase their gathered activity, whilst remaining safe and within the Government's guidelines.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with our leaflet [Coronavirus: Guidance on re-opening Baptist church buildings](#) which contains much more detail on the practicalities of opening your building.

If you usually meet in a school or alternative community facility, there is some UK Government [guidance for the safe use of multi-purpose community facilities](#). The Welsh Government has also produced [equivalent guidance of community use centres](#). You will also need to speak to the facility's management so that you may work within their requirements also.

Some guiding principles

1. **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. We encourage you to consider new ways of meeting together, but to ensure this is not at the expense of safety.
2. **Be inclusive.** As physical meetings are again possible, pay careful attention to those who might be excluded or unfairly treated by the patterns of meeting you are exploring. There was a degree of equality when none of us could meet together, but ease of access to physical services and events is mixed. 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.
3. **Think missionally.** For a season, the focus for many churches was on maintaining connection among the congregation. As we get more used to this prolonged season of restriction, 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?
4. **Consider sustainability.** Whatever form of meeting you decide upon, whether virtual or digital, 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. As we don't know when restrictions will be further lifted, it is best to plan so that your way of meeting is sustainable, even if, for example, this means not meeting one Sunday a month.
5. **Accept limits.** We are hearing of church leaders being put under pressure from members to meet and of rising frustration 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.
6. **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.
7. **Pray.** For an end to the pandemic; for restrictions to be safely lifted; for lessons to be learned; for those that remain vulnerable; for hope and creativity... and if you are praying as a church, does your community know that you are praying for them?

What is allowed

With regard to worship activity, churches may be used for corporate worship, private and corporate prayer, bible studies, youth and children's groups, weddings, funerals and other life

events. Each of these have their own conditions which may be different in England and Wales – these follow below. But there are some key guidelines to follow:

- **Social distancing should be 2m wherever possible.** In England, if 2m is difficult, 1m plus extra measures such as face coverings or meeting outdoors, is permitted.
- **Face coverings are mandatory 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 in light of the recent rise of Covid cases, we encourage a safety-first approach which may lead you to choose to ask staff to wear them also when others are present.
- **Social interaction should be kept to a minimum.** Whilst there might be interaction as part of a formal meeting such as praying together in a prayer meeting, mingling before or after services or events is discouraged. Social interaction in England can only take place, in churches as elsewhere, between up to six people from different households, whether indoors or outdoors. Even within these groups of up to six, those from different households should do all they can to socially distance from each other. In other words, while church worship may still include as many socially distanced people as the building or outdoor premises permits, only sub-groups of up to six people should interact socially at any length. We recognise that congregations do not tend to arrive or subsequently subdivide into groups of six. The underlying principle is that social interaction that causes people to mix should be minimised – please see Government guidance on [meeting with others](#).
- **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 to do so by Government.

A number of activities are still explicitly discouraged:

- **Congregational and choral singing.** In England, Small groups of up to six singers, such as in a typical church worship band, may sing in front of a congregation, both indoors and outdoors. There is no limit on the numbers of people performing in a professional capacity or if they are a supervised group of children under 18. In Wales, this is still limited to one solo singer. In all cases, the congregation should not sing at all.
- **In Wales, playing wind or brass 'blown' instruments.** This is now permitted in England (by those performing at the front but not by anyone within the congregation) though it might still be wise to discourage this. 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.
- **Sharing food or drink,** though see on communion below.
- **Use of common items such as hymn books and bibles.** In Wales, they 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 the necessary liturgy can be left on each chair but must be taken away at the end by the worshipper.

- **Any contact between people** such as handshakes, hugs or the laying on of hands.
- **Long services!** To minimise the time people spend in the company of others, the Government still 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.

Within these constraints, we would now encourage careful creativity. We know of churches running identical back to back services with enough time to clean surfaces between them; churches running a live service that is also streamed or recorded for those who cannot attend; churches that are meeting virtually most weeks but with a monthly afternoon live service for those who struggle to connect digitally; churches who deal with the extra burden of these requirements by not meeting at all once a month and encouraging members to join virtual services elsewhere; churches embracing reflective services in the absence of congregational singing, and so on.

Worship outdoors

Worship outdoors but on the premises should follow the same rules for social distancing and minimisation of social interaction as worship indoors.

In England, worship outdoors but off the premises is permitted and should follow same rules for social distancing and minimisation of social interaction as worship indoors. In Wales, the same is true but the maximum that can meet is 30. Additionally, a rigorous risk assessment for the event must have been completed in conjunction with the space’s private owner or relevant local authority. Despite all this, we suggest at this time that churches think very carefully before meeting for worship off the premises. This is simply because we think the public will not understand the exemption to the rule of six for an act of worship and are likely to believe that a church meeting in a public place is breaking the rules. We are keen that churches continue to consider how they are perceived to be protecting their communities.

Please note that no gatherings in private gardens for any purpose may have more than six people.

Online worship

There has been an explosion of churches streaming or recording services from people’s homes or from within a church building. We encourage churches to reflect on whether this new skill might provide missional opportunities for the future. We are hearing stories of some churches who have larger ‘congregations’ online than they did in a building. Others however are seeing their virtual congregation shrink as people tire of online worship. This is an area where churches may need to support each other with technical guidance and shared ideas of how to maximise the effectiveness of this medium. How best can you use pre-recorded video interviews, online or live recorded worship resources, preachers from anywhere in (or outside) the country, etc.? To find out about some best practice for online worship, please see our webinar, [Video and streaming solutions for churches](#).

Communion

Government guidance for communion remains 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. 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.

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.

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

Children in worship services

In live services, though the Government guidance says young children should stay with their parents, we have been told that creches are acceptable with certain conditions. Likewise, children's groups may meet. Please see our guidance on [Children's, Youth and Families ministry](#) for more detail. If groups are not offered, do consider how children might be involved in live or virtual services.

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](#).

Life events

Life events (baptisms, weddings, funerals, inductions and ordinations) tend to draw people from a wider area and inevitably the level of social interaction is harder to contain. For these reasons they are limited to the numbers outlined below. The government have specifically advised that churches should not seek to hold life events in a normal service of worship as a way of increasing the numbers who can attend.

Weddings

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

- In England, from 28 September the number attending a wedding service has been capped at 15. This includes the couple but not anyone who is working. This would mean, for example, that the minister, a professional photographer and a premises manager would not have to be counted among the 15. We also suggest that a small worship team would not be included in the 15. However, please note that the principle of capping the numbers exists for the sake of safety. Please do not suddenly give people 'roles' so they can be counted as working and thus increase the numbers attending. And remember that only 15 people may attend the reception in any case.
- In Wales, attendees must have been invited but the maximum number is defined only by the building capacity and social distancing guidelines.
- 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, but this is open to interpretation.
- 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.
- Guests have to wear face coverings. In England, the bride, groom and minister do not. In Wales, the couple are also expected to wear face coverings except when speaking the vows or kissing!
- 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.
- Receptions on church grounds with shared food are not feasible unless the church has a hospitality space such as a café that operates in line with Government [guidance for restaurants, pubs and bars](#). For those churches that do have this facility, receptions may be arranged for up to 15 people in England and 30 people in Wales, indoors as well as outdoors.

Funerals

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

- In England, the number attending a funeral service has been capped at 30. In Wales, attendees must have been invited but the maximum number is defined only by the building capacity and social distancing guidelines. The maximum number of mourners permitted at crematoria is determined by each crematorium and you should check with the funeral director.
- From 8 August it is mandatory for all to wear a face covering within the church building during a funeral. As for all church worship, the service leader is exempt from this requirement assuming they are appropriately distanced from others.
- 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.

In Wales, funeral wakes for up to 30 people may be held indoors as well as outdoors. In England, any gathering after the service should follow general social distancing guidelines that limit social interaction to a maximum of six people from different households indoors or outdoors.

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.

Baptisms

Baptism by immersion is now permitted under government guidance in both [England](#) and [Wales](#). It is, frustratingly, very hard to reconcile the different stipulations made by each government, so taking each in turn:

In England, 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 2m away from anyone else throughout except for 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.

Though not spelt out in the UK Government's guidance, we suggest the more usual pattern may be followed if the person baptising is from the same household as the candidate. That is, the candidate is immersed by being laid backwards into the water, supported by an arm around the shoulders.

Also, in England, if the baptism is arranged as a separate occasion from routine communal worship, the maximum number that can may attend is 30.

In Wales, only one person may be baptised before the baptistry is emptied and cleaned. 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 other cases, the candidate should 'self-immersed.' We appreciate that some will feel this to be an inadequate expression of fellowship when formally welcoming another into the Christian family.

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.

Alternatives

You might also like to consider alternatives to baptism by immersion in a church baptistry.

The Welsh Government explicitly permits baptisms, “in a safe external space designated for swimming such as a lido or beach that is patrolled by lifeguards.” We suggest that the same freedom to be baptised in water open to the public would apply in England also. However, the requirements above for each nation regarding who may baptise the candidate would remain. And please see our guidance above about worship outdoors in a public space, such as a river or beach.

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.

Private prayer

Churches buildings may open for private prayer. 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.

Prayer meetings and bible study

The UK Government has confirmed to us that interaction as part of a formal event, such as discussion in a Bible study, or sharing prayers at a prayer meeting, is acceptable. The usual accompanying guidance remains – those participating should be socially distanced and wear face coverings, and social interaction before or after the event is discouraged. Also, 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.

In England, small groups of up to six people from different households may now meet in private homes and gardens, i.e. indoors as well as outdoors. However, if you are thinking of meeting as a small group, please note that social distancing should still be practised. Be aware that many homes will not have a room large enough for a meeting to be safe even for only six people. It will also be wise in these circumstances to ask people to bring their own refreshments and to consider how touched surfaces within the home may be cleaned before and afterwards.

In Wales, small groups of six people from your 'extended household' may meet indoors at any one time. Please see Welsh Government guidance on [extended households](#) for more information.

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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