

Coronavirus: Guidance on church worship

Version (most recent first)	Changes
1 April 2021	Removal from Section 3 of the Baptists Together February statement; Correction in Section 3 regarding bible study and prayer groups in Wales; Addition of sentence in Section 3 to say that face coverings are not mandated for worship outdoors, though churches may wish to ask worshippers to wear one.
26 March 2021	Changes in Section 3 to allow in England from 28 March congregational singing outdoors; and from 29 March, blown instruments in worship, social interaction between sub-groups of six people, and weddings that are no longer restricted to exceptional circumstances; Change in Section 3 withdrawing permission for Bible study and prayer groups indoors on church premises in England; Change in Section 3 allowing outdoors children's activities in both England and Wales.
10 March 2021	Replacement in Section 3 of incorrect version of the BUGB recommendation regarding churches meeting for worship; Change in Section 3 to guidance regarding weddings; Comment added to Section 11 about the future for congregational singing; New Section 12 added regarding Easter.
5 March 2021	Correction in Section 3 to bring the text on worship bands and choirs in line with the table of what is permitted.
25 February 2021	Change to Section 3 to replace BUGB recommendation that churches should remain closed with new guidance; Clarification in Section 3 regarding permission for prayer and bible study on church premises and outdoors worship; Minor revisions to Section 7 regarding open coffins and those who are self-isolating at funerals; Addition of new Section 11 to lay out expected changes from 8 March 2021 onwards.
14 January 2021	Changes to the table in Section 3 to show that private prayer is allowed in church in England but not Wales; 'blown' instruments and singing outdoors are again not recommended in England.
7 January 2021	Correction to table in Section 3 to show that outdoors worship is not permitted in Wales when at alert level 4 and that for England prayer and bible study groups may not happen; Related change to Section 10 on prayer meetings and bible study groups.
6 January 2021	Deletion of Section 11 regarding Christmas arrangements; Addition to Section 3 of national lockdown requirement in England.
20 December 2020	Changes in Section 3's table and throughout to show extra restrictions for both 'tier 4' in England and 'alert level 4' in Wales.
17 December 2020	Clarification in Section 3 of permission for social interaction during outdoors gatherings on church premises and in a public space; Clarification in Section 11 of the thinking behind group size for door-to-door carol singing.
10 December 2020	Clarification in Section 3 that: in Wales that funerals are for close friends and family only; 'interaction' means social interaction. Clarification in Section 7 regarding those who are self-isolating attending funerals in Wales. Addition to Section 11 about carol singing and services in Wales.
1 December 2020	Clarification in Section 3 regarding singing and bands.
30 November 2020	Major revision of document to reflect revised rules in England from 2 December and in Wales from 9 November

1. Introduction

This guidance is based on 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](#).

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.

2. 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. This priority should be reflected in all your planning.
2. **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.
3. **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?
4. **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.
5. **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.
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.

3. 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.

With regard to what is formally permitted, at present:

- Wales remains at '[Alert Level 4](#).' Churches may open for in-person communal worship though the Welsh Government encourages alternative, virtual means of worship where possible.
- In England, since 8 March, restrictions have begun to lift. The [UK Government's 'road map'](#) lays out the how restrictions will hopefully be lifted through March, April, May and June 2021, depending on the success of the vaccination programme in reducing infection rates, hospitalisations and deaths from Covid-19. **The table overleaf therefore shows what is permitted at present. A new section has been included at the end of this document to aid churches in their planning, which will have to be provisional as we await further decisions from the Governments.**

What is 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 – from 29 March	Wales – alert level 4
Communal worship on church premises	Yes; indoors and outdoors for as many as social distancing permits. Indoors, attendees must only socially interact with their own households. Outdoors, sub-groups of up to six people or two households may socially interact.	Yes; indoors, for as many as social distancing permits. No; outdoors.
Private prayer on church premises	Yes; for as many as social distancing permits.	No
Congregational Singing	No; indoors. Yes; outdoors.	No
Worship bands and singers	Yes; including small groups of singers, though the number of singers should be kept to a minimum.	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*	No; indoors at home. Yes; outdoors at home for a group of up to six people or two households. No; indoors at church; Yes, outdoors on church premises with interaction limited to sub-groups of up to six people.	No; indoors at home. Yes; outdoors at home for a group of up to six people or two households. Yes; indoors at church. No; outdoors on church premises (as for communal worship above.)
Supervised activities for children	Generally no indoors, and yes outdoors; but please see guidance on children's work	Generally no indoors, and yes outdoors; but please see guidance on children's work
Communal worship off the premises	No	No
Wedding ceremonies	Yes, up to 6 may attend not including those working.	Yes; for as many (invited) people as social distancing permits.
Wedding receptions	No; indoors. Yes; outdoors for up to 6 people or two households including in a private garden.	No
Funerals	Yes; up to 30 people.	Yes; for as many (invited) people (close family and friends only) as social distancing permits.
Funeral wakes	Yes; up to 6 people, all of whom can interact, including in a private garden but not in a home.	No

* Permission to hold bible study and prayer groups in church in England is explicitly said to be not permitted in the UK Government's guidance. This is a reversal of an earlier change. It gives rise to the bizarre discrepancy that bible study and prayer groups on church premises are allowed outdoors yet not indoors in England, but indoors yet not outdoors in Wales. We are seeking clarification with Government.

For those churches not meeting in-person, but recording or streaming worship:

- **Minimising travel.** Many churches, whilst not holding in-person services, may wish still to use their buildings to record or stream worship. With the purpose of safety in mind we recommend that you minimise the number of people who have to travel to and gather in the building to facilitate worship. However, there is a fine balance here and we ask you also to take care of those who are preparing worship. Where possible, please ensure the burden is shared among a number of people rather than falling on just one or two.

For those churches that do decide to meet in-person, or for 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 not allowed. 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 to do so by Government.
- **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.
- **Worship bands and amateur choirs may perform only as indicated in the table above.** For professional choirs performing in church, please refer to the UK Government's [performing arts guidance](#).

- **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.
- **Food and drink may not be shared** except for communion – please see below.
- **Hymn books and bibles may not be shared.** 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 is to be avoided**, such as handshakes, hugs or the laying on of hands.
- **Services should be shorter rather than longer.** To minimise the time people spend in the company of others, the Government 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.

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.

5. Children in worship services

Whether children's groups may meet is set out in the table in Section 3. Please also see our guidance on [Children's, Youth and Families ministry](#) for more detail. This guidance also applies to creches, though please note the different sections of guidance according to whether the parents

do or do not remain with their children. If children's groups cannot meet, 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](#).

6. Weddings

Whether weddings and wedding receptions are permitted and how many people may attend is outlined in the table in Section 3. The number permitted does not include anyone who is working, such as the ministers, 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.
- 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, 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 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](#).

7. Funerals

Whether funerals and funerals wakes are permitted and how many people may attend is outlined in the table in Section 3. The number permitted does not those working such as the minister or funeral staff. There is more detail in UK Government [guidance on funerals](#) and Welsh Government [guidance on funerals](#).

We continue to recommend that funerals are held in the same venue as the committal, to minimise movement and interaction between people.

- 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.

- A separate service of thanksgiving, if separate from the funeral, should still be considered a funeral service with respect to this guidance.

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.'

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.

8. 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 in Section 3.

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 is 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.

9. Other life events

Other life events that take place within a general service of worship, should be treated in the same way as any other worship service with the maximum number attending as outlined in the table in Section 3.

The most obvious example is child dedications, which can take place without the extra limits on numbers that apply to weddings and funerals. However, the principle is to avoid large gatherings of people from different places, especially when they might find it very hard not to mingle. We suggest therefore that for dedications, parents are requested to invite only the very closest family members, and godparents, if any. 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.

10. Prayer meetings and bible study

Whether small groups may meet on church premises for prayer or Bible study is shown in the table in Section 3. Where they are permitted, 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 shown in the table in Section 3. 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 to be safe even for only six people.
- 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.

11. UK Government plans for March 2021 onwards

On 22 February, the UK Government published a new document, [Covid-19 Response Spring 2021](#). This is the 'road map' for how restrictions may be lifted in England from 8 March 2021 onwards, in four steps. Our interpretation of how this could affect church worship is included below.

Please note that we include this to enable you to make provisional plans. You must come back and check updated guidance before you proceed with any changes. The Government's final decision on each step will be driven by circumstances as each change point approaches.

The road map suggests that with regard to church worship:

Step 1 from 29 March

- Please see guidance above which reflects the 29 March changes.

Step 2 from no earlier than 12 April

- Community centres re-open, which may affect those churches that meet in public buildings.
- Funerals may be attended by up to 30 people; funeral wakes by up to 15; weddings and wedding receptions by up to 15; if in Covid-secure venues.

Step 3 from no earlier than 17 May

- 30 people may gather outdoors, removing the need for social interaction to be limited to sub-groups of six.
- Six people or two households can meet indoors. This means there can once again be social interaction between sub-groups of up to six people at church gatherings indoors.
- Weddings, wedding receptions, funerals and funeral wakes will have a maximum attendance of up to 30 people.

Step 4 from no earlier than 21 June

- All limits on social contact and all limits of life events will be removed. But please note that this does not necessarily mean that indoors gatherings will be free of restrictions. It may be that some distancing will remain in place.

Congregational singing

We are often asked when congregational singing will again be permitted indoors, as the road map makes no mention of this. Public Health England have indicated to us that this may not be until mid-June at the earliest.

12. Easter

As shown in the table in Section 3, congregational singing outdoors is permitted in England from 28 March. There is no relaxation to the prohibition on congregational singing indoors for Easter.

Whilst Easter Day outdoors sunrise services are permitted on church premises (as is outdoors worship at any time), permission to worship *off* the premises has not been given.

Ministries Team

This version: 01 April 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.

Contact Address and Registered Office:

Baptist Union of Great Britain, Baptist House, PO Box 44, 129 Broadway, Didcot, OX11 8RT
Telephone 01235 517700 email ministries@baptist.org.uk website www.baptist.org.uk
Registered Charity Number: 1181392, operating as a CIO

First Issue 29 June 2020; major revision 27 August; major revision 30 November