REOPENING OUR CHURCH BUILDINGS

1. Introduction
Under its roadmap to lift restrictions, the Government has outlined the measures that will be relaxed under Steps 2 and 3 of the plan. If the conditions are right, the current proposals are –

- Step 2: to reopen Churches to allow ‘individual prayer’ only from 13th June 2020
- Step 3: to reopen Churches for group prayer and worship from 4th July 2020

It should be borne in mind though that the reopening of our Church buildings is not mandatory, but remains the responsibility of Managing Trustees to decide, perhaps working with Circuits or Districts to develop phased approaches to suit their local situations and priorities. Any decision to reopen a Church should be based upon thorough risk assessments and planning to ensure that it is safe to do so, and can fully meet the health and safety requirements under COVID-19 UK Government guidance. It is acceptable to decide that it is not safe to reopen at this particular time, or could be carried out in a staggered or phased plan. It is also important to note that the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales may outline different dates and phasing for reopening, so please also refer to relevant regional guidance.

It is acknowledged that under previous Government policy decisions, some parts of Methodist Church property may already be open. This might be because they provide services to the homeless, run foodbanks or provided accommodation for blood donation sessions. Alternatively, they may have recently opened to provide accommodation for early years’ education such as pre-schools or nurseries. This guidance is produced to assist Managing Trustees who are now considering reopening Churches for individual prayer, and latterly worship and Church activities or services not allowed under previous Government policies.

2. Government Policy Basis & Timescales for Implementation

Places of Worship to open for Private Prayer:
‘Individual prayer will be permitted from 13 June, but communally led prayer, worship or devotion…will not be possible at this stage…other gatherings and services such as baptisms, weddings, supplementary schools, meetings and classes are not permitted.

Individual prayer within a place of worship is defined as a person or household entering the venue to pray on their own and not as part of a group, led prayer or communal act. They should be socially distanced from other individuals or households.’

Government Announcement 7th June 2020

Places of Worship to open fully for Public Worship:
‘Step 3 - The ambition at this step is to open at least some of the remaining businesses and premises that have been required to close, including personal care (such as hairdressers and beauty salons) hospitality (such as food service providers, pubs and accommodation), public places (such as places of worship) and leisure facilities (like cinemas). They should also meet the COVID-19 Secure guidelines.’


It is indicated that Step 3 will be effective from 4th July 2020, if conditions are deemed acceptable, and updated and separate guidance will be provided for this when it is confirmed. The Connexional Property Team will also monitor Government guidance and provide updates on the Methodist Property webpage – https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/property/coronavirus-guidance-for-property/.
3. **Overview of Planning & Monitoring Process**

Reopening our Churches is a significant decision for Managing Trustees, and should not be taken lightly. It should be well planned – both before opening and then once in use. To support all their discussions, Managing Trustees should have consideration for the following:

- Take time to allow full consideration on matters
- Do not assume you can immediately do things ‘as you used to do’
- Be creative, and remain open-minded to new ideas
- Manage expectations, listen and learn from mistakes
- Accept that saying ‘no’ or ‘not yet’ is not necessarily a negative decision
- Work together and share ideas, within your Circuit or District or with other faith groups

This planning process is essential, as it checks and ensures that the Church building accommodates the requirements for opening; or alternatively highlights what other considerations need to be discussed and agreed to make the property safe to open. This is a shared responsibility that should be ‘circular’ in process not linear i.e. each risk and action needs to be reviewed over time so that processes can be monitored and changes made if needed to ensure the safety of all parties. This is summarised in the diagram below, with each heading forming an important step towards reopening your Church building and using it safely:
4. **STEP 1: Plan Thoroughly**

The initial planning phase is to consider all areas of risk associated with opening and using the property, and should be undertaken before the building is reopened. The following is suggested:

i. Appoint a dedicated **responsible person** for Covid-19 related health, safety and safeguarding matters. This will ensure there is a single point of contact, so that decisions can be made quickly and efficiently in response to issues going forward and clear actions implemented.

ii. It is practical to have a delegated Committee to support this individual in decision making or actions. This can be convened ‘virtually’, but ensures consistency of approach & decisions.

iii. Undertake a **Risk Assessment** for the whole building.

iv. Follow the outcomes of the risk assessment and produce a live[^1] **Action Plan**. This should outline what physical changes or provisions Managing Trustees need to instigate to manage risks throughout the property.

[^1]: Where mentioned in this guidance, ‘live’ means a document which is reviewed and updated as part of a continuous process of reflection by those who own it, on how well it is working in reality, and making changes to it if needed; it is not intended to be a one solution, static document and forms part of Step 7 in this process.

v. It is advisable to review this plan weekly, or daily in the first few weeks, depending upon how the property is used and occupied. It may also be necessary for the **responsible person** to respond on an ad hoc basis if a particular issue arises during the course of a day; this is why the Risk Assessment and Action Plan should be seen as ‘live’ documents which evolve, to improve through learning and knowledge to ensure best practice is achieved.

vi. Meetings and discussions are important to ensure the planning and ongoing monitoring processes are completed successfully and that ongoing communication is practical, allowing for social distancing rules. The medium used should therefore be proportionate:

- Speak via telephone or an online meeting platform where practical;
- Use still photographs or ‘live’ recordings and electronic communication if a particular issue needs answers;
- If a property visit is required then operate a time system so that only essential people are in the building and social distancing rules can be accommodated safely;
- If attending in person and social distancing is not achievable, ensure suitable PPE is worn to avoid potential transfer of any infection e.g. masks, protective glasses & gloves.

vii. Once a decision has been reached to reopen the property for the first time please refer to the Connexional Property Team’s **Re-opening a Building Checklist** which covers the following:

- Airing the Building
- Outside the Building Checks
- Checking Cleanliness of the Building
- Electrics
- Heating
- Water Systems and Legionella
- Organ Maintenance
- Cleaning
- Covid-19 Risk Assessment
5. **STEP 2: Consult Widely**

It is important that Managing Trustees consult and engage with all those who use or access the building (stakeholders), to ensure that views and opinions are fully considered in the **Risk Assessment** and **Action Plans**. These might include the following (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Church membership
- Ministers
- Property Secretary or Property Stewards
- Church group leaders such as youth workers or mission enablers
- Those who care for the building, particularly those who clean it
- Local community, particularly those who use the building and its facilities

i. **Lease and Other Legal Obligations to Consider**

It is essential that TMCP are consulted in relation to any impact on leases or legal obligations. Please contact TMCP if you have any queries relating to the lease or licence under which a Third Party uses the Church premises. Specific information relating to COVID-19 and its impact on leases and licences can be found on the TMCP website in their **Lease COVID-19 FAQs** (FAQ 4 to FAQ 8 inclusive) and their **Licence COVID-19 FAQs** (FAQ 1 to FAQ 3 inclusive).

*Please note:*

- If managing trustees want to allow a Third Party to use more of the Church building than is currently used under the current lease or licence (to allow for social distancing) then this would need to be documented very carefully. Please contact TMCP so that full guidance can be provided depending on the circumstances.

- Any requests from tenants for rent concessions in view of COVID-19 must be considered and documented very carefully. Please refer to the guidance in the [Non Residential Leases – requests from Tenants to a rent concession](#) article on the TMCP website.

- Please bear in mind that the ability to limit rights that a Third Party exercises over communal areas will depend upon whether they are using Methodist premises under a lease or a licence. In relation to leases, please refer to [TMCP’s Lease COVID-19 FAQs](#) (FAQ 7.1). Managing Trustees have more flexibility with licences but will need to consider whether the terms of the licence require formal change. Please contact TMCP for guidance.

- Please consider any services provided to a Third Party under a lease, e.g. cleaning, very carefully bearing in mind not only the Government’s guidance and guidance issued by the Methodist Church relating to COVID-19 but also their legal rights under the lease. Please refer to [TMCP’s Lease COVID-19 FAQs](#) (FAQ 7.1).

ii. **Insurance Matters**

Please consult your insurer on any matters relating to property insurance. [Methodist Insurance](#) has provided a comprehensive set of Covid-19 guidance on their website.

iii. **Physical Building Alterations**

In this guidance, it is not intended to suggest that physical changes to a property, either temporary or permanent are required or indeed encouraged. Managing Trustees could consider this though as part of a wider project or expansion of their building for mission purposes in this regard.
If such considerations are undertaken, then it is important that Managing Trustees follow the correct process for obtaining consent and advice. This should include their District Property Secretary, the Connexional Property Team and Conservation Officer (if relevant) and TMCP.

6. **STEP 3: Think Holistically**

Managing Trustees should consider the building as a whole, particularly where Churches provide a mixture of spaces for worship, other Church activities or community activities. This should consider how different activities or users interact rather than looking at each situation in isolation. This will ensure that a ‘joined up’ plan is developed and that engagement with users of the building are considered and implementation plans are measured and effective.

i. **Numbers of Building Users**

As part of the initial planning and consultation it is essential that Managing Trustees and other building users assess how many people may be using the building at any one time during a typical week. This will allow some forward planning and ensure that all users are safe, whilst managing expectations for everyone.

ii. **Areas of Interaction**

Managing Trustees need to be aware that controls within users’ ‘separate environments’ may be easier to manage with clear guidelines and controls. It is very important that in any planning and proposed changes that equal consideration is given to the interfaces between different occupiers/rooms/properties and within any communal/shared areas. It is essential that these critical areas of contact between building users are risk assessed, action plans are clear and practical, and then processes are managed and controlled very carefully so that clear plans and areas of responsibility are allocated to a particular user to a shared, agreed standard (e.g. cleaning regimes). For example, such areas might include:

- Entrance doorways
- Corridors
- Washroom and WC facilities
- Kitchens
- Halls/Larger Rooms
- Outside spaces

This situation is especially relevant if temporary accommodation changes are being made, beyond the arrangements set out and agreed under an existing lease or licence agreement for example. It is important that if any changes are made, even temporary, to existing agreements then this is checked with TMCP – refer to their guidance set out in Step 2 above.

iii. **Property Access, Limitations, Means of Escape & Security Matters**

Safe means of access and egress for every building user is essential, and is considered in the risk assessments and action plans, including the following general points:

- Limit the number of key holders to the building to ensure controlled access.
- Ensure that any Church member unlocking does not fall into an ‘at risk’ category.
- Limit access to the other parts of the building not in use at the time; this will ensure management of any virus transfer and therefore implications on cleaning regimes.
- Ensure that everyone who accesses the building signs in and co-ordinate with other users the number of visits and personnel on site to ensure that social distances can be maintained.
- Ensure that any access or areas in use do not have compromised fire escape routes or means of escape to external areas.
• Ensure that any access or building limitations do not compromise security for the open parts of the buildings or other parts of the building.

iv. Moving around the Building
• Limit movement between different user group areas within the building(s) to maintain social distancing as much as possible.
• Limit the number of people who use lifts or stairs if possible/relevant.
• Reduce the number of people in high traffic areas, particularly if these are used more regularly as part of a temporary circulation regime.
• Mark areas using tape to help people keep a 2m distance.
• Consider introducing temporary pedestrian walkways to allow people to maintain social distancing when moving around – this may be particularly relevant in external areas.

v. Common Areas
Agree how communal or common areas are used, such as kitchens or toilets. The following should be considered:
• Physically moving tables/chairs so they are 2m apart.
• Staggering use times, or introducing a rota so that people are not using spaces at the same time – this should be more carefully considered depending upon the specific situation relevant to the Church building and how it is used.
• Where this is not possible, create additional space for different users.
• Marking areas using tape to help people keep a 2m distance.

Where you cannot keep a 2m physical distance, you need to think about how to keep common areas clean and prevent transmission by touching contaminated surfaces, including:
• How frequently you need to clean common areas.
• Identifying objects and surfaces that are touched regularly and decide how frequently to clean them.
• Setting clear guidance and line of responsibility for the use of kitchen and toilet facilities to make sure they are kept clean.

7. **STEP 4: Safety First**

Once the risks and planning arrangements have been implemented for reopening the building, there are the considerations for how the building will be used in practice. This has to be undertaken with the primary view of a person’s safety being the first consideration.

i. Cleaning and Hygiene
• Follow the COVID-19: cleaning of non-healthcare settings guidance.
• Ensure that sufficient handwashing facilities are available that provide running water, soap and paper towels. Where a sink is not nearby, provide hand sanitiser in shared spaces – particularly in entrance areas.
• Use signs and posters to increase awareness of good handwashing technique (see Step 6).
• Provide regular reminders on avoiding touching your face and to cough/sneeze into your arm.
• Set clear guidance for the cleaning of kitchens and toilets to make sure they are kept clean.
• Set clear guidance on how to handle and store cleaning materials/products safely (COSHH Guidelines) and when cleaning procedures need to be followed.
• Clean surfaces such as doors, sinks, toilets, light switches, bannisters, more regularly.
• Ensure that bins are emptied throughout the day.
• Spaces should be well ventilated using natural ventilation (opening windows) where possible.
• Prop doors open, where safe to do so (bearing in mind fire safety and security), to limit use of door handles and aid ventilation.
• Work together with other Churches or building users to ensure proportionate supplies of soap, anti-bacterial gel and cleaning products for all areas of the building are available.

ii. PPE (Personal Protective Equipment)
• Ensure that PPE is available to Church members if risk assessments suggest this is necessary when using the building, please refer to the following link for more details.

iii. Specific Considerations for Individual Prayer
• (A) Steward(s) at the entrance should manage how people enter and exit the building; this may include monitoring seating spaces to avoid compromising social distancing.
• Before and after use, the worship area should be deep cleaned.
• Before, during and after use of the worship area, leave doors open.
• Use suitable temporary markings on pew seating or arrange loose seating to maintain the minimum distance of 2m between people (this should include adjacent, in front and behind). This could be adaptable for those from the same household.  
• In main entrances/exits, 2m distances must be clearly marked on the floor, as these areas may be more susceptible to people congregating.
• Hand sanitisers should be available at entrances/exits.
• A small number of face masks should be available for members of the congregation if required.
• Cushions and kneelers can be retained as long as Managing Trustees are satisfied that they can be suitably cleaned after the building is used; otherwise they should be stored away.
• Communal books of any sort are not to be used (and should be stored away); any words or texts should be displayed using a projector or individual printed material which can be removed or destroyed.
• Individual worshipers can bring their own books if this is preferred, and take them away again.
• If everyone who wishes to pray cannot be accommodated safely, then alternatives should be considered, such as using using other rooms with links for sound and/or vision if required.
• The use of recorded music is acceptable, but guidance suggests that singing may currently increase the risk of transmission, it is therefore discouraged at present.

NOTES
1 This specific guidance is aimed at Churches who may wish to open for individual prayer only; once more detailed Government guidance is available for opening Churches for general worship, this will be added to this section.

2 For delicate fabrics or furniture of historic value please ensure the marker material and cleaning techniques used are suitable for the material concerned and will not cause damage.

8. **STEP 5: Provide Training**

Managing Trustees should consider ways in which these measures are implemented and managed. This will be met through forming a team of people who can undertake these responsibilities, either within a current or additional role. Each of these individuals should be provided with information and training proportionate to the role. The following roles should be considered through the Action Plan:
What specific roles are required?

- Overall ‘Responsible Person’ for Covid-19 safety and safeguarding matters
- Steward(s) at entrance/exit
- Steward(s) within worship space to allocate seats and ensure social distancing
- Someone with responsibility for listening to concerns or ideas from a welfare perspective

It is important to recognise within the Committee formed for this purpose, that these responsibilities should be shared as much as possible to avoid burdening a small number of people.

9. **STEP 6: Communicate Effectively**

i. **Agree how Plans will be Communicated**
   - Find communication media suitable for all Church members
   - Avoid confusion and ‘mixed messages’ which could jeopardise any safety measures
   - Allow for regular updates if plans are changed or updated

ii. **Information and guidance**
   - Provide all users of the building with information on the procedures & guidance
   - This should preferably be done prior to reopening the building or them using it
   - If this cannot be done, then ensure that clear guidance is available on entering the building

iii. **Signage**
   - This is essential to successful communication and can include:
     - Information on how to use the building
     - Directions towards specific entrances or exits
     - Directions towards rooms to avoid unnecessary movement around building
     - Directions towards specific rooms for user groups
     - Hygiene considerations such as hand washing

iv. **Other Considerations**
   - It is important that all building users are aware of restrictions so they can prepare in advance
   - Consider how you will pass information and guidance to people who don’t have English as their first language and others who may struggle with written and verbal communication or have disabilities such as visual impairment

10. **STEP 7: Constantly Review**

- The designated Committee should hold regular reviews with the ‘responsible person’
- Hold conversations with interested parties, listening to and acting on their concerns
- Implement changes to the Risk Register and Action Plans if necessary
- Ensure the plan aligns with any wider Government or Connexional guidance