

GUIDE FOR CHURCH MEETINGS, SMALL GATHERINGS & HOUSE GROUPS

Version 1	16/09/2020	Issue of original guidance
Version 2	29/09/2020	Updated to include latest government guidance, rule of 6, Covid Secure environments, addition of links for Wales & Scotland and incorporating Connexional guidance for house groups and small church gatherings

1. **Introduction**

This Guide is part of STEP 5: Safety First in the process for reopening and managing your church building. It seeks to clarify how in practical terms Managing Trustees and other church members can hold formal meetings, small gatherings and house groups safely during the current restrictions, in order to fulfill any governance or planning responsibilities. There are a number of strands of Conference, Connexional and Government guidance which this document seeks to draw together to allow those holding meetings to decide on the right approach for the situation.

2. **Covering Church Meetings etc. Generally – online versus face to face**

- i. Church meetings, church council and Synods etc. be conducted either online or in person.
- ii. The **2020 Conference** passed a resolution effectively enabling church business meetings to be held electronically whilst the public health restrictions on physical meetings continue. This resolution applies particularly where it would otherwise be impossible to comply with Standing Orders, for example in appointing church officers for the coming year.
- iii. The Connexional Ministries Team have recently produced a leaflet guide for decision making during Covid for local church meetings and councils. This can be found under the heading **How do we best confer and make decisions during the COVID-19 Pandemic?** - <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/coronavirus/official-guidance/#conferring>.

3. **Considerations for Church Meetings etc. held Online**

- i. Where practical, all churches, Circuits and Districts are encouraged to conduct meetings on an electronic 'virtual' basis. Recommended video-conferencing platforms include MS Teams and Zoom, the latter being particularly popular for meetings with a large number of participants.
- ii. The Connexional Team has issued guidance to enable Districts to host Synods by Zoom webinar, which you can read here: www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/guidance-for-churches/using-zoom-webinar-for-synods/
- iii. Online 'virtual' meetings should be conducted in very much the same way as you would normally. Items will be discussed, conferred upon and then agreed. Only those participants to the meeting may take part in voting (Methodist Standing Orders do not allow for proxy voting).
- iv. Clearly, not all participants being in the same room presents challenges for meeting Chairs and there needs to be good discipline during the meeting such as 'muting' microphones when not speaking and 'raising hands' to indicate when participants want to speak. Further advice on running virtual meetings and meeting etiquette can be found here www.icsa.org.uk/knowledge/resources/good-practice-for-virtual-board-and-committee-meetings.
- v. However, it is important that running virtual meetings should not preclude any participants who are not so technically engaged and savvy, or do not have an internet connection, for example. Where possible, allowances should be made for such people, for example, enabling them to dial into meetings by telephone or supplying IT equipment.

vi. As for all church business, please make sure you document everything properly and keep a record of all decisions made. You should state in the meeting minutes that the meeting was held electronically.

4. Considerations for Church Meetings etc. held in a Place of Worship

- i. Under the Government’s guidance for Safe Use of Places of Worship¹ it confirms that ‘meetings and small gatherings’ are permitted under the [Safe Use of Multi-purpose Community Settings Guidance](#)².
- ii. Any meetings taking place in a place of worship or ancillary accommodation should meet the guidance for multi-purpose community settings. This includes ensuring a building is [COVID-19 secure](#)³, which means they meet the [7 Steps for Working Safely Together](#) for opening and running as outlined in the government guidance.
- iii. Those in attendance should gather in groups of no more than 6 people. This relates to the maximum group size before attendees enter the building and therefore can sit together in that building. It is not a directive to sit people together in groups of 6 as part of a meeting.
 - a. You can continue to space chairs and people as before with 2m distancing between household groups, which could be individuals, couples, larger families, etc.
 - b. Within each group of 6, those who are not in the same household should continue to practise social distancing.
 - c. Each group of 6 should **not** mingle with any other groups (see FAQ’s below for more information).
- iv. Below are some other considerations for holding a face to face meetings in this setting:
 - a. Consider the meeting location in the wider context outlined in detail in the [Guide to Reopening and Managing your Church Building](#), to ensure it is safe to use;
 - b. It is essential that Risk Assessments are produced to ensure the building is COVID-19 secure, as well as for the meeting itself, and any resulting mitigation actions implemented. This is a legal requirement under Health and Safety law and the HSE.
 - c. There is no cap to the number of people attending a meeting, as this is governed by an assessment of the safe capacity limit of the space available in the risk assessment.
 - d. Consider the meeting in the wider context of the building, limiting movement around the building by people or the effects on other building users.
 - e. The provision of refreshments is discouraged and covered by [Food & Drink guidance](#);

¹ In England, see Section 1, Introduction - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july>

In Scotland - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/pages/overview/>

In Wales - <https://gov.wales/guidance-reopening-places-worship-coronavirus>

² In England, see Section 3d - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-multi-purpose-community-facilities/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-multi-purpose-community-facilities>

In Scotland - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/pages/other-permitted-uses/>

In Wales - <https://gov.wales/safe-use-multi-purpose-community-centres-covid-19>

³ England - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903464/staying-covid-19-secure-2020-230720.pdf

Wales - <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-08/keep-wales-safe-at-work-five-key-steps.pdf>

Scotland - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-general-guidance-for-safer-workplaces/>

- f. Please Refer to Section 6 in the [Guide for Other Community Users in your Church Building](#) for other more detailed practical considerations for meetings, including entrance/exits, circulation and toilet facilities.

5. **Considerations for Church Meetings etc. in Other Settings**

Other settings may be considered for church meetings etc. but this is not encouraged if a Covid-secure setting within your place of worship is available. Be aware that settings ii. and iii are governed by different Government settings guidance and not places of worship guidance:

- i. Grounds adjoining your church building – please refer to the [Guide for Open Air Worship](#) if you wish to meet in small groups on grounds adjoining your church building. This might include, for example, a car park, courtyard or garden area. This setting is covered by the [Safe Use of Places of Worship](#) government guidance.
- ii. Private spaces – this would normally be a house or garden of a church member for example, particularly for House Groups. In principle this is allowed, although it is encouraged to use the garden spaces rather than inside the property to reduce the risk of virus transfer. In either situation though, all those attending should adhere strictly to the Government’s guidance for domestic meetings with others which are outlined in the document – <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-meeting-with-others-safely-social-distancing/coronavirus-covid-19-meeting-with-others-safely-social-distancing> Critically this limits the maximum number of people who can meet to 6, and attention should be paid to the FAQ’s at the end of this document.
- iii. Public spaces – Meetings etc. could be held in outside public spaces, and further details of this can be found in the [Guide for Open Air Worship](#).

6. **Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government - Frequently Asked Questions**

Q. Do I need to arrange my seating into groups of six rather than in households?

- No. The total number of people attending worship is limited by how many people can socially distance within the venue. Seating should enable everyone to practise social distancing from those they don’t live with.
- The maximum number of people that you should socially interact with in a place of worship is six, particularly when leaving or arriving.

Q. Can you stop social distancing within a group of six?

- No. Everyone should continue to practise social distancing when mixing with people they don’t live with or are not in a support bubble with, even within a group of six.

Q. How does the rule of six work where the activity is communal, and not in groups?

- The number of people able to attend a place of worship is determined by the number of people the space can safely contain while all attendees adhere to social distancing of 2m between households, or 1m with additional safeguards.
- You should only enter and leave the venue together, and socially interact, within a group of up to six, whether this six consists of one household or multiple households.

- Where group members are from different households, they should maintain social distancing of 2 meters, or 1 meter with additional safeguards

Q: Can groups socialise with one another after worship/meeting etc.?

- No, groups of six should not mix within the venue and should leave in the group they arrived in.
- Everyone, at all times, needs to limit social contact as much as possible.

Q. Does the exemption for Places of Worship cover faith groups hiring other venues (or outside spaces) for communal worship?

- Yes, it is the activity of communal worship that is exempt from the law against groups of more than six people from gathering.
- A faith group can host a prayer service or communal worship at a hired venue that is Covid-19 secure, with the same restrictions as a place of worship.

Q. Does the exemption cover faith groups gathering in outdoor public spaces for communal worship?

- Yes, it is the activity of communal worship that is exempt from the law against groups of more than 6 people from gathering, rather than the place of worship.
- This means that a faith group can host a prayer service or communal worship in an outdoor public space, with the same restrictions as a fixed place of worship.
- In order to do so, they must undertake a rigorous risk assessment for the event alongside the private owner or relevant local authority, and ensure that safeguards are in place to allow for strict social distancing between attendees.
- All attendees should provide contact details for the purposes of NHS Test and Trace.
- This exemption does not apply to private spaces such as gardens.

Q. Does the exemption cover faith groups gathering in outdoor private spaces, such as gardens, for communal worship?

- No. The “rule of six” applies to all private dwelling spaces, including gardens.
- Only six people are permitted by law to gather in a private garden.
- We do understand that this may cause challenges for communities planning to host religious services in private, however the regulations have been changed given the public health risks associated with private houses and gardens.

Q. Are prayer groups/study groups for adults meeting in Places of Worship capped at six?

- No, there can be multiple groups of six people doing the same activity provided that these groups do not mingle.
- Faith groups can organise prayer and study groups, both at a fixed Place of Worship and at a hired venue that is Covid-19 Secure venue.
- If the group is hiring a venue, they must undertake a rigorous risk assessment for the event alongside the private owner or relevant local authority, and ensure that safeguards are in place to allow for strict social distancing between attendees.
- All attendees should provide contact details for the purposes of NHS Test and Trace.

Q. Can six adults meet for worship in a house if the children are asleep?

- The law is clear. If there is any risk that a group of more than six will mix (including young children) then this must not happen.

7. Further Guidance

This is general guidance as it is not possible to address every local property situation, so if there are any queries arising from this guide, please contact the Connexional Property Support team on property@methodistchurch.org.uk.