

Introduction

The Government is lifting most Covid-19 legal restrictions from 19 July 2021. Its formal guidance for the safe use of places of worship can be found here - [COVID-19: guidance for the safe use of places of worship - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/guidance/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship).

To assist ministers and leadership teams and all those with responsibility for church property, the Connexional team has produced a summary of the key changes and guidance for the Methodist Church. This is to support this process of change with further details and suggestions to enable everyone to make informed decisions.

Mission, Planning & Monitoring

Deciding to welcome people back to your church building is a significant decision. Allow for planning before opening, with careful management and regular reviews once the building is in use. Taking a positive approach to this will encourage positive discussion, you might consider:

- Allowing plenty of time to fully consider matters, risks, approaches and options;
- Not assuming you can immediately do things ‘as you used to do’;
- Being creative and open-minded to new ideas and approaches;
- Managing expectations, listening and learning from mistakes;
- Accepting that ‘no’, ‘not yet’ or ‘not like this’ can be positive decisions;
- Working together and sharing ideas.

See this as circular in process, which allows for regular reviews of decisions made:



Reflect

Before we consider the practical aspects of reopening and managing our church buildings, it is very important that we take time to reflect:

“Church” can be wherever we gather or scatter, conscious of our calling as disciples of Jesus. We already knew this, but the lockdown has brought it into sharp focus. We are now permitted to open our buildings once more. A desire to “return to normal” is natural, but may not be practically possible or missionally necessary at this time. Our task in this moment is to consider what use of our buildings and what pattern of worship will best serve the discipleship of our people and the needs of our local community.

As we continue on a journey during this pandemic, these questions can help us discern what God has been doing in us and in our communities. In this context, we can consider what God would have us do with our buildings and how God would have us worship:

- What have you learned during this period as a church that excites you about worship? What have you learned about evangelism and building relationships with new people?
- What have you not grieved for or missed as a church during this period? What might you decide not to pick up again?
- How have you perceived God’s presence and hiddenness?
- What has this period taught you about the foundations of your mission as a local church?

Use these questions alongside your mission plan to work out God’s way forward for you. For help with writing or reviewing your mission plan, download the new [Mission Planning Workbook](#), and contact your District Mission Enabler and/or Regional Learning Network Co-ordinator for help and advice. The following review questions are suggested:

- What changes in your community have you noticed during the pandemic? What new strengths have you observed? What new needs have arisen?
- What has been the impact of the pandemic on your church? What strengths have emerged? In what ways have you been weakened – e.g. members who have died, members shielding at home, furloughed staff, lost income?
- Have any new dreams or visions come to light?
- What priorities did you discern when writing your mission plan? Are these still the things on which you believe God would have you focus?
- What actions had you planned? Can they still take place - perhaps in a different way – or must they be set aside for now? What new actions might be possible?
- What fruit do you long to see in your community as a result of your actions?

Refer to the new Strategic Guidance for the Use of Property for Mission to inform and encourage your discussions and vision - [Property & Mission \(methodist.org.uk\)](https://www.methodist.org.uk/property-mission)

Plan

It should be kept in mind that deciding to reopen your church remains the responsibility of Managing Trustees. You should work with your circuits or districts to develop a phased approach if necessary, to suit local situations and priorities, and allow resources and expertise to be shared where needed. A decision to reopen a church building should be based upon assessing the risks and putting plans in place to ensure that it is safe to do so. It is acceptable to decide that it is not safe to reopen at this particular time, or that reopening should be carried out in a phased way.

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

- It might still help with practicalities to have a **responsible person** for COVID-19 related health, safety and safeguarding matters. This could be the same person or group which has responsibility for health and safety generally within a church or circuit. It helps give a clear point of contact for everyone and allows clear communication to be maintained.
- Alternatively, Managing Trustees working together within circuits could consider this as a shared role covering a number of chapels. This could be a good way of sharing resources, information, knowledge and ideas.
- Undertake an initial Risk Assessment for the whole building at this stage for how you will continue to ensure everyone's safety. The template and guidance notes can be found [here](#).
- Review the Risk Assessment on a regular basis and make changes as needed, particularly as you understand more about third party users covered in the next section.
- 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

Consult

Further to the initial assessment, consult and engage with those who use or access the building. This will ensure that every stakeholder's requirements are considered in the final version of the [Risk Assessment](#) to be completed before people return to the building.

Lease and Other Legal Obligations to Consider

Consult TMCP in relation to any impact this might have on existing lease or licence obligations for Third Party users of 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 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).

Insurance Matters

It is important consult your insurer on any matters relating to property insurance, including any impact of Covid-19 on the conditions of your specific insurance policy. Methodist Insurance has provided a comprehensive set of COVID-19 guidance on their [website](#).

Actions for Consideration

As many restrictions are lifted, whilst always adhering to government advice, the Methodist Church is urging caution for the sake of others in the church, community and for self-care. The following areas are points for consideration:

- **Stay at home if you have Covid-19 symptoms**

If you develop [COVID-19 symptoms](#), the government advises that you self-isolate immediately and [get a PCR test](#), even if your symptoms are mild. You should self-isolate at home while you book the test and wait for the results. You must self-isolate if you test positive.

You should also follow government guidance in regards to NHS Test and Trace if you are instructed to self-isolate, and should not use the building.

- **NHS Test and Trace**

It is no longer a legal requirement for churches to collect and keep records of contact details of building users. However, churches are still encouraged to support the NHS Test and Trace system through display of a QR code or alternative means of collecting and securely storing details. See [Maintaining records of staff, customers and visitors to support NHS Test and Trace - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#). The government also continues to encourage the use of the NHS Covid-19 app in this process where building users are able, and comfortable, to use this.

- **Testing**

Alongside formal PCR testing for Covid-19, there are now **rapid lateral flow tests**, which are available free to anybody and can provide instant results and are self-administered. If churches are working with particularly vulnerable individuals or groups, particularly through pastoral work in people's homes, this will help manage that risk. Packs of these tests can be ordered online, more information is here - [Regular rapid lateral flow coronavirus \(COVID-19\) tests - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#).

- **Numbers Attending and Social Distancing**

There are no legal restrictions on numbers of people attending worship, churches activities or third party activities, and social distancing measures have been removed. It is important, through conversation and risk assessment though, to be open and understanding of individual concerns and anxieties and accommodate them where possible. Particularly for those who are vulnerable or at greater risk of being infected.

- **Face Coverings**

There are no legal restrictions on the wearing of face coverings within church property, but the Methodist Church is still recommending that face coverings are worn when inside the building and particularly when sitting for longer periods in a large group, such as during a worship service or when distributing communion or other consumables.

It is still accepted though, that in some cases this is not practical. This might include those leading a service, or volunteers who are assisting with activities such as reading, preaching or leading prayer. In these cases, it is correct to temporarily remove a face covering as needed.

Equally, there are some who cannot wear a face covering, or they need to be removed temporarily and churches should be mindful of this. This could include some of the following situations potentially:

- young children under the age of 11 (Public Health England do not recommended face coverings for children under the age of 3 for health and safety reasons);
- not being able to put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment, or disability;
- if putting on, wearing or removing a face covering will cause you severe distress;
- if providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading to communicate;
- to avoid harm or injury, or the risk of harm or injury, to yourself or others;
- to eat or drink if reasonably necessary;
- in order to take medication;

Churches should also consider keeping a small number of face coverings available for members of the congregation if required. Further information on face coverings can be found here - [Face coverings: when to wear one, exemptions, and how to make your own - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-exemptions-and-how-to-make-your-own)

- **Singing**

Singing, music and performances are now all allowed in places of worship in any setting, indoors and outdoors. It should still be considered that such activities can potentially increase the spread of the virus through droplets, particularly in larger groups. It is therefore recommended at this stage that face coverings are kept on for singing during church services to reduce this risk. Guidance for singing in other settings is covered later.

- **Be aware of those who are vulnerable**

The government is advising those who are classed as clinically extremely vulnerable to follow the same guidance as everyone else. However as part of an inclusive Methodist church, those in this situation should be considered, and their specific needs accommodated where possible.

To help the conversations needed to achieve this successfully, this document outlines some of the considerations and precautions needed - [Guidance on protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable from COVID-19 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-on-protecting-people-who-are-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-from-covid-19).

- **Fresh Air and Ventilation**

Increasing the amount of fresh air entering a building can contribute to the dispersal of the virus droplets given out through coughing, breathing, talking or singing. It is therefore encouraged in all rooms to be occupied. During the summer, it is still encouraged to think creatively by meeting and worshipping outdoors perhaps. If you are meeting indoors still consider limiting the time spent together in larger groups. The government has produced some outline, non-technical guidance for how to improve fresh air into a building in homes and church buildings, it can be found here - [Ventilation of indoor spaces to stop the spread of coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ventilation-of-indoor-spaces-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19).

For a more detailed approach to improving fresh air in church property, the Health and Safety Executive provides advice on [working safely](https://www.hse.gov.uk/working-safely) and [ventilation and air conditioning](https://www.hse.gov.uk/ventilation-air-conditioning). This

includes ways of measuring low levels of ventilation such as Carbon dioxide (CO₂) monitors where a space is poorly ventilated with businesses encouraged to take steps to improve ventilation if CO readings are consistently high.

- **Hygiene and Communal Resources**

Although legal expectations for cleaning and handling of objects have now been removed, it is still important to consider good practice to continue to protect people:

- Personal hygiene

Wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitiser regularly throughout the day. Regular hand washing is an effective way to reduce your risk of catching illnesses, including COVID-19. Churches should ensure that adequate hand sanitiser is available on entry into the building, around the building and particularly in toilets and kitchens.

- Cleaning

Refer to the separate [Cleaning Churches during Covid-19](#).

- Offerings

It is still advised that offerings are carried out in ways that avoid the use or transfer of coins and notes. This might be facilitated through standing orders or other electronic money transfer systems. If traditional offerings cannot be avoided, then this should be collected in a single receptacle, by one individual, and any cash then placed in a suitably safe place and left for 72 hours. No individual should be asked to handle money unless they are willing to do so.

- Communal Books

It is still advised that communal books of any sort are not to be used preferably (or should be stored away after use for a minimum of 72 hours). Where practical try to have any words or texts displayed using a projector or through individual printed material, which can be removed or destroyed.

- Holy Communion

There are still some elements of Holy Communion where some consideration can be made to ensure everyone feels safe to take part, you could consider the following:

- In terms of the elements, wafers are preferable, and can easily be sourced online;
- Communion received in 'one kind' (i.e. bread only) is perfectly valid;
- Those handling items related to the celebration of communion should wash their hands thoroughly before and after;
- Face coverings should be worn during the handling and distributing of items;
- It is recommended that shared receptacles are not used;
- If possible items which involve minimal preparation should be used;
- If there is to be an act of passing the peace, it should occur only verbally;
- Speaking over the sacrament is not allowed unless it is securely covered;
- All items used in the celebration of communion should be disposed of safely or thoroughly washed after use;

- It will be helpful to explain to the congregation before the service begins about how it will proceed and the arrangements for receiving the elements.

- **Other Church Events**

As outlined earlier, all restrictions are also lifted for specific events such as weddings, funerals and baptisms. It is suggested that to ensure everyone feels safe attending these events, the following common suggestions might be considered:

- Handwashing prior to and after the ceremony for those taking part;
- Liaise and communicate with the parties involved in advance;
- Knowledge of numbers attending and potential seating plan;
- Consider how those who fall within a vulnerable group are able to attend safely;
- Have a basic arrangement for cleaning and hygiene;
- For those who cannot attend, considered live-streaming if possible.

- **Other Activities**

The current government guidance suggests that all places of worship should follow the principles set out in the [Working safely during coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance from Step 4 - Guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-from-step-4). Many of these principles have outlined previously including the need for Health and Safety Risk Assessments – this is still a legal duty on Managing Trustees as venue managers. This is particularly in regard to other activities which might happen within the church property either organised by the church or by a third party. Further specific guidance from the government on contexts which some churches may have to consider can be found here –

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Wedding and civil partnership ceremonies, receptions and celebrations - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-wedding-and-civil-partnership-ceremonies-receptions-and-celebrations)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance for funerals and commemorative events during the coronavirus pandemic - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-funerals-and-commemorative-events-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic)

[Restaurants, pubs, bars, nightclubs and takeaway services - Working safely during coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance from Step 4 - Guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/restaurants-pubs-bars-nightclubs-and-takeaway-services-working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-from-step-4)

[Hotels and guest accommodation - Working safely during coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance from Step 4 - Guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/hotels-and-guest-accommodation-working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-from-step-4)

[Events and attractions - Working safely during coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance from Step 4 - Guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/events-and-attractions-working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-from-step-4)

[Protective measures for holiday or after-school clubs and other out-of-school settings for children during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/protective-measures-for-holiday-or-after-school-clubs-and-other-out-of-school-settings-for-children-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak)

- **Live-streaming or recording**

During the period of closed churches, it appears many have turned to alternative ways for people to access worship and teaching – particularly through live-streamed services or pre-recorded worship and teaching. As churches reopen, it is encouraged to continue providing this alternative access to ‘church’ which many have found beneficial. It can help in a number of ways:

- Pastorally it allows those who are unable to attend a place of worship in person to still have an opportunity to be part of a church community;
- Giving alternatives to attending in person will reduce contact between people and will help manage risk and protect the more vulnerable to the effects of the virus;
- Those who are experiencing symptoms or are quarantining and therefore cannot access a place of worship will still be able to access services etc.
- It enables those who are not members to access worship and teaching where they otherwise may not have attended a church service.

Communicate

As restrictions are lifted, and plans for reusing the building again, communication is very important, so continue to think about:

- How agreed approaches are to be communicated to all building users.
- Using a variety of communication media to ensure everyone is kept informed.
- Allowing for regular updates or if plans are changed.
- Who you need to contact from specific groups – everyone or perhaps just organisers?
- How will you communicate to those entering the building for the first time?
- How will you use signage which informs and makes people feel safe?
- How will you communicate with people to whom English is not their first language or others who may struggle with written and verbal communication or have disabilities such a visual impairment?

This time of change may be stressful for those returning to the building for the first time – communication in these situations is very important; it could be useful to refer to this NHS guidance so you are better informed in how to support individuals during this time - [how to cope with anxiety about lockdown lifting](#).

Review

As the changes are implemented, allow for regular reviews of changing government guidance and how the situation is developing locally:

- Hold regular reviews with the ‘Responsible Person’.
- Hold conversations with interested parties, listening to and acting on their concerns.
- Implement changes to the Risk Assessments if necessary.
- Ensure the plans align with any wider Government or Connexional guidance.

Where to ask questions or get additional Support

We appreciate that there is a lot to think about and discuss, there may be specific situations or arrangements that are not covered here. If so, contact the following:

Connexional Property Team (<https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/property/>)

- **General Queries:** property@methodistchurch.org.uk or 020 7467 5271
- **Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas:** conservation@methodistchurch.org.uk
- **Pastoral enquires:** mvw@methodistchurch.org.uk
- **CPD & Standing Orders queries:** lcp@methodistchurch.org.uk

Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes (www.tmcp.org.uk)

- **Legal Enquiries:** legal@tmcp.methodist.org.uk or 0161 235 6770
- **Finance Enquiries:** finance@tmcp.methodist.org.uk or 0161 235 6770

Methodist Insurance (<https://www.methodistinsurance.co.uk/>)

- **General Queries:** enquiries@micmail.com or 0345 606 1331