

Re-opening of Church Building

Some Frequently Asked Questions

It is over five months since we entered lockdown embarking on a new way of life for us as individuals and for our church. We have been moved and impressed by the creative ministries of so many who have adapted through these times to different expressions of our faith, including worship, pastoral care and community outreach. Some of you have really struggled, and that is very understandable, others have perhaps surprised themselves, finding that they are flourishing in new ways. Thank you for anything and everything that you have been able to do in the service of God – we are truly grateful to you.

The Leaders are now in the process of planning and preparing for what our next stage looks like as a church family. This process is being undertaken alongside the ongoing COVID-19 changes and guidance from the Baptist Union and UK government.

Here are some FAQ's to help explain how things have progressed so far.

Please be aware that the Covid-19 rules are liable to change and the answers made may not reflect the current or full picture and the significant work being undertaken to re-start activities within the building.

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When will church re-open?

The requirements for the safe opening of the church building are extensive. The Leaders are working with the guidelines to think and pray through the wider issue of gathering for worship and other activities.

Here is an example of some of the things that need to be considered:

- 2m distancing
- Cleaning and Hygiene
- Risk assessments, procedures and checklists
- Test and Trace
- Protecting the vulnerable

At this stage the leaders are considering opening for Communion Services only on some Sunday afternoons from mid-September.

This will of necessity be for small numbers only and there will be a booking system in place.

Full details will be available as soon as possible.

What restrictions will there be when church reopens?

The focus of the Government guidelines for places of worship is on enabling spaces to be kept safe and in reducing the risk of transmission.

This has involved a number of steps being taken to ensure the building is fit for purpose before re-opening to attendees.

- 2m social distancing both inside and outside the building
- One way system to enter and exit the building
- Clear signage
- No serving of food or drink (the kitchen is out of bounds)
- The use of face masks (see below)
- Seating will be managed through an online booking system (see below)
- No congregational singing (see below)

What if the Government regulations are replaced by guidelines does this mean the church does not have to follow them?

In his statement to Parliament on 23 June the Prime Minister said that many of the legal requirements in England would be removed and replaced with guidance. The difference is that guidance does not involve criminal sanctions for any breaches. However, failure to follow the guidance may affect protection under insurance policies and these need to be considered.

Further, the reputation of LEBC may be negatively impacted if we are seen to be disregarding advice or guidance and viewed as placing people at risk of infection.

Do we have to keep track of who attends a church gathering?

This is not mandatory, but in line with other government guidance for other venues it is strongly advised by the Baptist Union to keep an accurate temporary record of visitors for 21 days. This should be done in a way that is manageable, and will assist NHS Test and Trace with requests for data if needed for contact tracing and the investigation of local outbreaks.

LEBC has now implemented a process for recording these details compliant with data protection legislation.

Who needs to wear a face mask?

Face coverings became mandatory from **8 August** for those attending worship regardless of social distancing. Children under 11 and those with respiratory conditions are excluded from this as in all cases where face coverings are otherwise expected.

If I am leading a gathering or preaching do I have to wear a mask?

Leaders of gatherings and others who assist them, such as by leading prayers or Bible readings, are exempt from wearing a face covering. However, this only applies for the time they are speaking at the front.

This exemption does not apply to worshippers, who must wear face coverings consistent with the requirements for any other public space.

Does the church have a booking system for attending a gathering?

Yes. This will be available through the church website very soon.

Can we meet outdoors?

There are no plans to hold gatherings outdoors at this stage.

In England, gatherings of up to 30 people can meet in any public outdoor space (say in a park) for any purpose. **However, the gathering would have to be made up of small groups of two households or six individuals from different households, with no social interaction between these groups.**

With this in mind it is difficult to see how we could meet as a Church Family in the way that we would like to and satisfy the current requirements.

Beyond this, gatherings of more than 30 people are also possible if the occasion is formally organised by a business or charitable institution, this includes Baptist churches.

In this instance, interaction between those outside of each small group of two households or six individuals is **still not permitted** and we would need to consider whether realistically we can ensure this will happen. A risk assessment would have to be completed and the occasion managed to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission, much as for a service indoors. We would be expected to liaise with the owner or manager of the outdoors space (Earley Town Council if using Kilnsea or Laurel Park) to discuss how the occasion can be staged safely and securely.

We would also need to consider how the local community might view a larger public gathering and whether this will enhance or hinder our witness.

Can we meet in homes?

Not quite yet.

Our weekly small groups meeting in homes are affected by this. We can meet in homes subject to the Government guidance below:

You should only meet people you do not live with in 3 types of groups:

- you can continue to meet in any outdoor space in a group of up to 6 people from different households
- single adult households – in other words adults who live alone or with dependent children only – can continue to form an exclusive ‘support bubble’ with one other household
- you can also meet in a group of 2 households (anyone in your support bubble counts as one household), in any location – public or private, indoors or outdoors. This does not need to be the same household each time.

It remains the case – even inside someone’s home – that you should socially distance from anyone not in your household or bubble. Those who have been able to form a support bubble (which is those in single adult households) can continue to have close contact as if they live with the other people in their bubble. This should be exclusive and should not change. This change also does not affect the support you receive from your carers.

When we meet together can we sing?

Not yet.

In both England and Wales, congregational singing is still specifically not permitted as it is considered that this enhances risk of virus spread. In the guidance for England for the reopening of church for public worship from 4 July it states: *“Activities such as singing, chanting, shouting and/or playing of instruments that are blown into should be specifically avoided in worship or devotions and in rehearsals. This is because there is a possible additional risk of infection in environments where individuals are singing or chanting as a group, this applies even if social distancing is being overserved or face coverings are used”*.

However, the guidance for England was updated on 15 August to permit singers (along with the use of brass and wind instruments) to perform both indoors and outdoors. So worship may now be led by a “small group” of singers. The previous limitation to professional groups has been removed. What constitutes a small group is not defined but the Baptist Union interprets this as excluding choirs and urge churches not to push the boundaries on this and limit groups of singers to no more than 5. They also advise that brass, woodwind or other instruments that are blown into should be avoided. Other instruments may be played but instruments must not be shared between instrumentalists.

The Baptist Union recommend that we ensure there is strict distancing of 2m (and ideally more) between singers and wind instrumentalists and any members of the congregation and consider the use of additional measures. The risks associated with singing and other loud vocal activities is currently being assess by Public Health England and we will update this question once the outcome of the review is public.

Can we share communion when we meet together?

Yes.

We acknowledge that Communion is an important, biblical practice that many may wish to resume. However, communion poses a particular problem and Government guidance is strict. Bread and wine cannot be passed from person to person. And it is recommended not to collect bread and wine from stewards.

As an alternative, pre-packaged individual cups of juice with a sealed pocket on top for a wafer will be available. These will be placed on chairs before a gathering, though we note the environmental cost of single-use plastic.

Can we baptise people?

Yes.

Baptism by immersion is now permitted under government guidance in both England and Wales. However, it is very hard to reconcile the different stipulations made by the UK government.

The guidance states that in England, a number of baptisms may take place in the same baptistery water as long as only one candidate is in the baptistery 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.

Apart from the stipulations made further considerations will be required in respect of the number who would be able to attend due to social distancing (2m).

Can we take an offering at a church gathering?

We would encourage giving by direct bank transfer or online as this removes any risk of virus transmission. Details can be found [here](#)

However, if this is not appropriate for your circumstances then we can consider having a collection plate but would ask people to take care not to touch it if possible. There will be no passing of an offering plate during a gathering. Any cash offerings will either be isolated for 72 hours before handling or counted with the use of disposable gloves.

Can we offer a crèche facility at a church gathering?

Not yet.

For the time being, children of all ages are expected to remain with their families when gathering as a congregation to worship.

All shared facilities (such as toys, books etc) will be removed and/or put out of use. Families are encouraged to bring their own resource pack that might aid their young children to worship within the gathering if necessary.

Can we start children's ministry?

Yes, but not yet.

There are a lot of guidelines around this question. The Baptist Union have interpreted these guidelines to be relevant for organised groups such as Sunday Club, DNA and TNT where children are defined as "up to age 18". However, there is additional guidance in respect of those providing for children under 5 years old.

In outline, these recommend that, to reduce the risk of transmission, children and young people who attend should be kept in small, consistent groups, and of no more than fifteen children and at least one staff member. Children should be assigned to a particular class or group and should then stay in those consistent groups for future sessions and avoid mixing with other groups.

This raises a number of questions that need careful consideration before any group can meet. A risk assessment for each group would need to be carried out and a number of steps implemented to ensure the safety of all attendees.

On-line material and activities are currently being used to support the different age groups. Whilst it would be hoped to find safe opportunities for face-to-face activities there are currently no plans for using the building for any groups.

Can Mulberry Bush meet?

Not for the time being.

For the very youngest children (under 5), both crèche and toddler groups where the parent or guardian remains with their child are *technically* possible. However, The Government's 'Places of Worship' guidance requires that young children should be supervised by the parent or guardian at all times.

Moreover, when adults and families are gathered in this way, the general rules on social distancing also remain. That is, only two households may have close social contact indoors. Both carers and children would have to remain distanced from anyone outside of this two household sub-group. This will be extremely difficult to practise in a setting where toddlers are present. In addition, the guidance still expects 'shared facilities' for children such as play corners, soft furnishings, soft toys and toys that are hard to be put out of use. Given these constraints it is not practical to meet at this present time.

Nevertheless, we still continue to engage with families through the LEBC Mulberry Bush media channels and are looking at other creative ways in which we can keep ongoing contact with them.

Can we still hire out our premises?

Yes.

The Government guidelines state that clubs or groups that use community facilities can meet again and that facility managers (LEBC Operations Manager/Secretary) should follow all COVID-19 guidelines to facilitate them.

The guidance specifically states that venues should not facilitate large gatherings or celebrations.

In thinking about the balance between church activities and our regular hirers, the Leaders have looked at what is best suited to resuming before others. In the light of this it has been agreed to allow the use of the premises by Slimming World only at this stage.

Risks assessments by both LEBC and Slimming World have been conducted to ensure all procedures comply with necessary guidelines, how cleaning is conducted between sessions and that social distancing and numbers are adhered to.

Slimming World recommenced using the building from Tuesday 25 August (and on a Saturday morning on a temporary basis) with limited numbers per session. Only those pre-booked with Slimming World can attend.

Will the toilets be open?

We will be discouraging the use of the toilet facilities in the building by asking attendees to use private facilities at home before and after any service if possible.

However, this is unlikely to be completely workable, so access to the disabled toilet will be available if necessary. Toilets are likely to present an elevated transmission risk and so need some careful management. We suggest that children under 11 are accompanied to the toilet by an adult from their household to ensure compliance with good hygiene practice and social distancing.

Additional Questions?

If you have any questions not answered above please email the [Church Secretary](#)