

Guidance from the Synod Moderators on the re-opening of church buildings

As lockdown/stay at home requirements are gradually eased across the United Kingdom in the coming months, we know that churches are now keen to make plans to re-open for public worship and other activities.

SUMMARY



The Moderators want to urge continued caution, both in the timing for re-opening and what happens afterwards. Information is still being gathered about how new variants are spreading and whether people who have been vaccinated spread the virus. The pandemic is not over and neither shall it be for some time yet. **Pay attention to the relevant Government guidance on what you can and can't do, and, vitally, follow it.** Additionally, we remind you of 1 Corinthians 10:23: "all things are lawful but not all things are beneficial, and not all build up." Even though it may be lawful for church buildings to be open in the later season of this pandemic, it might not yet be the right time to open. Covid prevalence and consideration of local 'hotspot' information must take precedence over any date of the diary, which might mean further delay to opening up, with decisions being reversed at short notice.

Follow the law of love: who will you be protecting by remaining closed for public worship, and who will you be excluding? What is the most loving response you can make over re-opening? Yes, we know that many have been starved of human contact through lockdown and are desperate to resume activity. You might just find, as in God's kingdom, that you need to turn your thinking upside-down. Those you thought safest to be out and about might now be the most vulnerable (as they won't yet have been vaccinated). Those you have included through online worship now may again find themselves outside your fellowship.



The decision to re-open must properly be made by Elders' Meetings, considering the regulations/restrictions in place, local prevalence of the disease and pressures on the NHS, and measures in place to control risk of infection both in the church and the grounds. Even if/where it is permitted, we urge churches to consider carefully whether they should open as soon as Easter Day, unless the current improvements are sustained and the risks are properly assessed and managed. Rather, we suggest that Pentecost may be a better time to consider as a point for the resumption of in-person worship, subject to a number of important conditions being met, as described below.

Specific guidance

1. Firstly, we want to state clearly that **decisions must not be governed by dates** – whether proposed dates for the staged easing of restrictions or particular festivals or anniversaries.

The driving factor must be public safety. Consider:

- How many Covid cases are there locally and is the case rate falling?
- Is the rate of spread (the 'R' number) sufficiently low?
- How is the vaccine rollout progressing and how many of your known congregation have been vaccinated?
- What is happening with Variants of Concern locally, which may be more infectious or more resistant to known vaccines?
- Remember that churches are public buildings: what are the risks to visitors that you may not know and who may be at greater risk than your "regulars"?





2. Before re-opening, the Elders' Meeting must review and revise thoroughly your Risk Assessment, and make sure you can implement it and if necessary, enforce it robustly. The pandemic is not yet over and people's lives are still at risk. The Elders may be criminally liable if serious breaches of Health and Safety occur. The questions we originally posed in [Emerging into the 'New Normal'](#) are, we believe, still relevant.
3. Only when all safety measures are in place can you begin to re-open.
4. Not every member will remember the rules about hand hygiene, social distancing and face coverings. It will be the Elders' responsibility to remind them (repeatedly). Be especially aware that once people have left the building they will want to stop and chat. Reinforce the guidance on distancing and the size of groups that are allowed to socialise – it must not be a “free-for-all” mingling. As well as potential breaches of regulation and the risk of Covid fines being imposed, consider the witness to passers-by who might see “those Christians” flouting the rules!



5. Congregational singing is still not allowed in England, Scotland or Wales. There is no information as to when this will be allowed. The best inference we can gain from the UK Government is that the ban is likely to exist well into the summer and quite possibly beyond and that it will not be tied to any of the four “roadmap” steps in England. Will this prohibition on congregational singing affect your decision on the timing to re-open? It is such a key part of the non-conformist worship experience: will some prefer to stay away/worship online until it is deemed safe and legal to sing together?



6. In all three jurisdictions, the dates for successive easing of restrictions are provisional and subject to review as data on infection rates, hospitalisations and vaccinations are scrutinised (and the Welsh government have not even announced provisional dates). Do not assume that because we are due to reach Step X of easing that we can/should definitely re-open on the following Sunday.



7. From what we know of the government plans for England and Wales (the Isle of Man, and the States of Guernsey and Jersey are in different jurisdictions), we do not recommend resuming public worship on Easter Sunday.
8. If the governments continue to link specific activities with the progressive easing, think about what public/in-person worship is more like? Popping into a newly-opening non-essential retailer for 10 minutes, or lingering in a place of hospitality for a longer period? We believe this will be a helpful guide, subject always to points made earlier about safety, to shape your thinking. We do not encourage churches to re-open any earlier than the point at which non-essential retailers re-open. In Scotland, depending on government decision, it may be allowable to be open on Easter Day, though with limited numbers (probably 20).



- Congregations are urged to consider carefully whether to make use of this opportunity, if it arises. We have survived one Easter Sunday under lockdown restrictions: we can do so again.



9. In England, the earliest date for the hospitality sector to fully re-open is provisionally set in the week before Pentecost. Across the UK several million more people are expected to have received at least their first vaccination compared with the number by Easter Sunday. The same step is provisionally intended to the point when, in England, up to 30 people will be allowed at weddings, baptisms and other key life moments. We stress that the date is provisional. If the Covid situation is sufficiently under control in your area, we see real symbolism in returning for in-person worship at Pentecost, “the Church's birthday.” At Pentecost we celebrate how the Holy Spirit brought new life to the Church and drove the message of the Good News about Jesus out into the world. We suggest that this may be a helpful target point for re-opening, stressing the conditionality of the date, the need to

consider current virus risk, and that different jurisdictions will be moving at different speeds and may not, at this point, allow your church building to be open for worship. We have come through one Pentecost under lockdown. We hope it will not be necessary to do it a second time, but it would not be the worst thing in the world if it is necessary.



10. Regardless of the date and festival/season when a church decides to open, safety must be the priority. The last thing anyone wants is for church buildings to become a hot-spot for infection with coronavirus. The World Health Organisation has identified six conditions for safe easing of restrictions; the first five are related to data around virus prevalence and control measures. As well as working to ensure the premises are as safe as possible and that locally the risk of infection is at a reasonable level, Elders may wish to consult with the congregation and move no faster than people are ready to move. But neither must the Elders be under pressure to re-open when the indications are contrary to that decision being taken, as they bear both a legal responsibility for this and the denominational responsibility. Please remember that in a number of churches the Minister may not be vaccinated for some time or have other reasons why they should not immediately resume leading in-person worship, and they also must not be pressured into doing things that would put them at unreasonable risk.



11. Consider the future of live-streamed worship and distributed worship material. Recognise that some people will not be able to come to worship in a church building, or will not yet be ready to do that. Who will you cut out by only offering in-person worship? How can you support and include them? Can you collaborate with other churches to share “hybrid” worship (that which is offered both in-person and online and including both groups of people)? Can you direct members of your church who cannot or are not yet ready to resume in-person to online worship offered by another church?

Remember the poor and the dispossessed: think-give-love



Finally, as and when churches to return to their buildings, we would encourage both congregations and individuals to consider making a thank offering. The development and deployment of vaccine has been a marvel and far greater than any of us may have dared to dream a year ago. Yet large parts of the world have had very little of the vaccine supplied and face huge logistical challenges in deploying it.



We commend both the URC-supported Christian Aid “Give thanks for your vaccine” campaign (see <https://urc.org.uk/latest-news/3740-give-thanks-for-your-vaccine-through-urc-fundraiser.html> for more information) and the Unicef appeal working with the Covax programme (<https://www.unicef.org.uk/donate/coronavirus/>)



Gifts might be given as an expression of thanks for all those who have carried out the research and testing, or in memoriam of loved ones who have died during the pandemic. Your gifts will mean life for others.