

Opening for private prayer?

From the General Secretary of the United Reformed Church, the Revd John Proctor:



There was an announcement yesterday (7 June) about [the reopening of churches in England for private prayer](#).

In the United Reformed Church, we generally focus on gathering for worship, and we have been less concerned to set venues aside for private prayer.

Private prayer is of course possible at home. However, some of our congregations have been used to offering this sort of facility in their church buildings, for members and for visitors and passers-by, and they may be keen to reopen.

If this is a move you want to make, here are some preparatory guidelines. Although these are written with England in mind, they may also be helpful to our churches in Scotland and Wales as they prepare for the easing of restrictions in their respective nations.

These ought to be read in conjunction with the Synod Moderators' ['New Normal' document](#):

- 1) **Plan very carefully** before you act. Haste will surely cause problems.
- 2) **Many people cannot visit church** at all at the moment because of medical concerns. That might affect both the value of reopening, if some members felt excluded, and the number of people who could help with matters such as door stewarding.
- 3) Further to the point above, some elders and ministers will be very uncomfortable with reopening now, perhaps for reasons of personal health or out of concern for others. We **must not pressure one another**, either to consent to a decision to reopen at this stage or to participate personally in the activity needed to reopen.
- 4) If you do want to go ahead, remember that this is **a local decision, but not only a local decision**. The Elders' Meeting is responsible for practical matters. But before going ahead, elders should check with the building's trustees (usually the Synod Trust Company). They must also check with insurers; the Trust Company may be able to help with this.
- 5) What works in one place might not be right elsewhere. Do **a proper risk assessment**, for your building and context, and record this in the Elders' minute book.

Here are two risk assessment templates, as used by the [Anglicans](#) and [Methodists](#). Our Synod Moderators are currently developing a URC counterpart to these documents, after which this page of guidance will be updated accordingly.

- 6) **Churches must be Covid secure** before opening even for private prayer. Care will be needed around cleaning, staffing, stewarding and monitoring, toilets, entrance and exit, and social distancing. This will not be easy.
- 7) Any use of the building in this way should be **genuinely individual** – not an organised gathering of church members who are ‘all, of course, praying privately’.
- 8) Churches with **community facilities** – a café, for example – should not confuse opening for private prayer with a decision to open the café. These are different matters, and a decision about one does not automatically decide the other.
- 9) **Wales and Scotland** have governments and regulations of their own. Decisions about these matters by the Westminster Government apply in England only.
- 10) It is also possible that some areas or regions of England will have their own restrictions or concerns. **We must take public guidance seriously**, both national and local.

John Proctor, 8 June 2020