

Reopening of churches – Question and Answer Event

On the 8th August face coverings became mandatory in places of worship. Can you clarify what this means for our churches?

When the guidance says something must be done, that means it's enshrined in law. When something is said that it should be done, it means that is actually very strong guidance and you would need a really good reason not to do it and the guidance (1) says that face coverings must be worn in places of worship.

Having said that there are exemptions and these include a minister delivering a sermon or someone assisting a minister in delivering something, although not when they are standing over consumables (the government's catch all language for the elements of communion).

The guidance relating to face coverings very specifically refers to the other national guidance (2) for wearing face coverings where there is a long list of exemptions of people who do not need and should not be required to wear a face covering: children under the age of 11, never children under the age of three.

There are a range of things including people who are assisting people who are lip reading, people who may experience some form of psychological or physical distress by wearing something over their face; and it's not our job to ask them what they experienced that means they cannot wear a mask.

There's clarity in the national guidance (2) that says we should be considerate of people's reasoning for not wearing a face covering, even though it says it is a legal requirement in the places of worship guidance.

Should we do temperature checks?

There is no guidance that these are to be used outside of very specific places i.e. hospital settings and security settings (possibly). For the general workplace, places of worship, shops, pubs, these kinds of places; temperature checks are not advised for a few reasons:

- Mostly they are not accurate, they only give a skin temperature not an internal temperature.
- The devices on sale now are designed for building surveys, taking the temperature of an oven or for industrial uses or DIY purposes. They are not clinical grade tools for diagnoses. (The guidance for schools and early years' settings when they first came out was don't take temperatures because they are not reliable and it sets a difficult conversation up that you don't need to be having.)
- More recently the Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Body has suggested to be very cautious unless you have a clinical grade thermometer for this. Outside of specific healthcare settings there is little evidence as to its efficacy. (5)

There is nothing in the Connexional guidance that says that temperatures need to be checked. As Trustees it will all come down to the risk assessment.

We would hope that we would all work with dignity and respect when it comes to supporting people and their wellbeing; and we shouldn't have to ask people to treat others with care and kindness.

A suggestion may be to use signs reminding people that there are reasons that others may not be able to wear a face mask and reminding everyone to treat others with kindness might be a good way forward.

The Govt has produced a resource to show that individuals are exempt (similar to 'baby on board badges'. (6)

How can you tell whether somebody is just deciding they don't want to wear a mask or if they do have a clinical reason?

There is no way of telling if people genuinely cannot wear a face mask or if they are just being obstructive. What we have to remember is that face coverings are one tiny element and not the most effective element in infection control.

Bigger issues are not reminding people to wash their hands and not reminding people to social distance; and if you find people starting to sing or pass the peace or wanting to hug because they haven't seen people for a long time. These are the bigger issues in infection control than one person choosing to wear a mask or not.

We work in a broad range of guidelines and cannot tell people what to do. Rather church trustees must make the right decisions for their context but stick to guidance.

Are visors acceptable or should we be using face masks?

Visors are classed as PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) whereas face coverings are not PPE (they are not clinically graded). Visors are required in Aerosol Generating Procedures (ie when a dentist uses a high speed drill). If someone works in an environment where they are likely to be spat at (certain areas of criminal justice has seen people wearing visors). National guidance (2) appears to be in place only for people providing Close Contact Services (tattooists, nail bars and hairdressers).

What has happened is that because visors are more comfortable to wear over a long period of time, people have adopted them as cough guards, almost a travelling version of the Perspex screens that have been put up in supermarkets or banks.

There is little clinical evidence they are going to help you unless you are in one of those close contact situations. Nurseries and childcare settings are advised not to wear masks and not to wear visors but individual risk assessments are important and people can make their own assessments.

Visors are sometimes used instead of a plexi-glass screen when someone is singing. You'll be aware from the places of worship guidance (13) that an individual can sing (usually a professional) can sing in an act of worship if (according to the guidance) it is behind a plexi-glass screen. Some people have used visors instead of the plexi-glass in this type of situation but you've still got to be a fair distance away and a visor does not mean you can get within 2 metres.

Visors are popular but there is no real clinical evidence that they are going to help in our context, apart from if someone is lip reading. Visors are a good nod to people who are looking to protect themselves and others if they are lip reading but are not common in childcare settings.

Guidance for places of worship refers to face coverings quite specifically because they do different things. Visors are often not fitted properly and don't prevent breath or the droplets from coming down.

It's not a step that is required, unless for those who don't feel they can't wear a mask but can wear a visor so it becomes an option.

How do you get the virus?

The only way for the virus to get into your body is via droplets and contact, so if someone coughs or sneezes directly within 2m of you there's potential to contract the virus. Also if you touch a surface droplets have landed on, there's a potential **but** the virus cannot be absorbed through the skin.

If it's on your hands and you don't wash your hands and the next thing you touch is adjusting the visor and it's close to your eyes, your nose or your mouth, then you're going to introduce it to your body. So the more you wear something around your face (and if you're not used to wearing something around your face) the more you'll end up touching your face.

Currently there doesn't seem to be any government advice around washing face masks?

There is some guidance in the guidance for face coverings (3). It refers to storing and washing them in a particular way, discard them if they are single use; store them in a polythene bag to wash them if multiple use and wash on a regular basis.

There has been a rise in pleurisy admissions to hospital for people who have worn face coverings for up to 12 hours a day – taking them off to drink, smoke and talk to people. They have then put them down and so they get dirty and then have put them back on again, and wear them the next day which has seen a rise in the number of infections which is an issue.

Now we have to wear masks in church can we now sing?

The short answer is no.

This is partly because singing pushes out the droplets with greater force. The issue becomes if people who are not wearing face masks then also choose to join in the singing. There is work being done by Public Health England and choristers to assess what is transferred during singing. We might see some changes in the guidance as the research tells us with greater clarity just how far droplets travel when people are doing different types of singing.

There are a range of issues with this but the guidance (1) at the moment is clear in that singing, shouting, chanting of any type is not permitted at the moment in a choral or group fashion.

Will leaving a 72 hour gap remove the need to do extra cleaning?

72 hours is the length of time we know the virus can last for on certain surfaces and still remain active. After that it is so diminished that it is very very unlikely to still be active. The 72 hours gives you the ability to be able to say that the virus should not be alive at this point. So if you are meeting your normal cleaning regime and no one is going to be using the building for maybe 3 or 4 days then in terms of Covid you don't need to put anything extra special in place.

There is guidance on cleaning non-healthcare settings (7). There is not just Covid to factor into cleaning regimes, also think about Legionnaires and other things like that.

From a property perspective we need to ensure we are providing places that are safe and we have done the most that we can do. So if we have the capacity to clean after people have left then we should do so. Property support stays in line with government guidance and we must stay on the right side of the law.

Can we now move to 1m + distancing since the implementation of face masks?

Yes, (technically) if other precautions taken but ideally you should stick to 2m unless you really really have to. This is largely because the large droplets which contain Covid fall to the ground within 1m. One and a half metres becomes a problem if people aren't wearing masks properly or at all.

If it means that you can only fit 20 people into a service rather than 25, then so be it, particularly as most of us are working with those in the clinically vulnerable group. Multi use buildings and over 70s do not mix (2). Don't let one bit of supposed PPE change your thinking about everything else.

The biggest and most important things are still distance, handwashing and not touching your face.

We have a significant number of rooms which are let to community groups normally, the government guidance states there is no requirement to use face masks in such rooms which are wholly separate to the worship area?

For multi-purpose sites, the individual organisations must be aware of what the legislation says concerning what they are doing (ie nurseries need to know what is required for their setting). This should all be brought up in the risk assessment – that is if there is overlap between what they do and what you do. Each organisation is answerable to the guidelines for their own perspective.

Are we allowed to use hand driers or not?

The best and most effective method for minimising infection is to use paper towels and a bin (foot pedal to avoid people having to touch it), with a bin liner that can be bundled up and disposed of.

Some hand driers are less likely to spread virus than others. The powerful ones that spray up into your face are not advised.

Fabric towels that everyone can use are an absolute no no.

Connexional guidance (14) does state that you can use hand dryers but does not refer to which type of hand dryer; and only states that they should be wiped down regularly.

Please remember that after washing, hands are only clean once they are dry. If using alcohol sanitiser your hands must be properly air-dried before touching anything.

Does the panel have any ideas or guidance regarding the celebration of Holy Communion in our churches?

Full guidance regarding Holy Communion can be found here:

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18298/guide-for-holy-communion-10820.pdf>

We have mentioned signing but what about reciting the Lord's Prayer or the Creed?

Guidance (2) reads as follows:

'Except for the limited circumstances outlined above, people should avoid singing, shouting, raising voices and/or playing music at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult or that may encourage shouting. This is because of the potential for increased risk of transmission from aerosol and droplets. Therefore, spoken responses during worship should also not be in a raised voice.

Activities such as singing, chanting, shouting and/or playing of instruments that are blown into should be specifically avoided in worship or devotions. This is because there is a possible additional risk of transmission in environments where individuals are singing or chanting as a group, and this applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are used.'

If we aren't using the church can other organisations (worship groups) use it?

When you do the risk assessment it should assess whether there is any contact between the two groups (which there shouldn't be) so you're using separate entrances and exits and using separate

facilities so that the transmission risk is low. The assessment should show no contact between the two; that you are able to do social distancing, and all the concerns are looked into so everyone is kept safe.

Some churches have had nurseries using their buildings for some time because they were early years settings (and allowed to open earlier than churches).

Please refer to the section entitled Guide for Other Property Users via the following link:
<https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/property/coronavirus-guidance-for-property/>

Attendance to church and the over 70s?

Guidance (2) reads as follows: 'Certain groups of people may be at increased risk of severe disease from COVID-19, including people who are aged 70 or older, regardless of medical conditions. Individuals who fall within this group are advised to stay at home as much as possible and, if they do go out, to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside of their household. You should consider informing these groups in particular of the symptoms of COVID-19 and current stay alert and social distancing guidance.'

We are in contact with very vulnerable people, they may not think they are but people who catch Covid and are over 80 are 70 times more likely to die of Covid than people under the age of 40 (9).

So we are looking the biggest imbalance of people's experiences of Covid. We are also seeing evidence of people having long term effects of Covid; so people recovering and having long term effects in other parts of their body i.e. kidneys

Can churches open if they are able to find someone leading worship?

The decision about a particular church meeting for worship or bible studies is up to the local trustees and must be done in conjunction with a risk assessment to qualify if it is safe to do so. If a circuit meeting has said that none of their churches are going to open until a particular date then that would overrule the local trustees.

Local trustees cannot force the Superintendent to provide preachers if they say that most preachers are in the at risk category. Therefore if you are going to meet it needs to be locally organised worship.

You must complete your risk assessment to establish if it is safe enough to do so and as long as all the provisions are in place.

Should over 70s not be attending service?

The guidance for reopening places of worship has a specific line in it about the over 70s and that there should be very clear thinking about whether or not they should be returning to the worship environment because although there have been changes in the national arrangements for shielding, it's important to recognise that the guidance specifically talks about people who are over 70 being particularly vulnerable and a recognition that many faith communities do a lot of work with older members of the community.

Children and the church?

All the evidence would suggest that children are not super spreaders of this disease but the evidence is based on the dataset of who has tested positive; and very few under 19s proportionately, have tested positive for this disease. You must also recognise that for a long time you couldn't get tested

if you were under 11 so the length of time adults have been tested is longer than the time that children have been tested. There's a lot of work going on in schools to clarify this but it would seem, at the moment that the biggest group of people who are impacted by this disease are older. And this is not always based on what other conditions you might also have. You could be an incredibly fit 75 or 80 year old and it hits you differently to someone who is a bit younger.

Do we need to see risk assessments from other users of our premises?

Yes. We do need to have a risk assessment for a whole building and where there are interactions. They should have a risk assessment to satisfy you that they are operating safely.

When we reopen how long can we stay in for service?

Methodist Church guidance (13) encourages worship to last for between 30 – 45 minutes and that there be no informal gathering afterwards for tea and coffee or anything else.

Can we use audio instead of singing?

Yes, it's possible to have video or audio of someone singing but you need to ensure that other people don't join in with that and the congregation understand that they are just listening to it or watching it.

A suggestion might be to treat a hymn as a reading and so have someone read the words of the hymn but not have any music; so that is one way of including our hymnody but without singing.

Can you clarify the District's stance on when churches can reopen?

The District recommended that churches did not feel under any pressure to reopen once the government guidance changed on 04 July; but we did not say that no church could reopen until September.

The District's position is that a number of things need to happen first i.e. risk assessment in place and to ensure that the church council has made that decision.

By local trustees do we mean it is church or circuit trustees that decide upon reopening?

It is the church council (local trusteeship) that is responsible for deciding how the building is used.

Is the number of people allowed in a service dependent on the size of the building or is it limited to 30 people?

Government guidance (2) states life cycle events (weddings and funerals etc) allow a maximum of 30. There was never a stipulation in regards to the number of people in an act of worship, it was more to do with the capacity of the building. The guidance (15 and 16) on weddings and funerals is changing all the time and so we need to keep an eye on that.

Please remember that it is not only when you are in the building that you have responsibility. There is a section in the national guidance which talks about protective security (7). You are also responsible for the groups of people waiting outside and how they get into the building before they can wash their hands. If you are on a high street you will also need to consider, as part of your risk assessment, how people can keep 2m apart.

Some churches are using a booking system which will help with planning and assessing numbers.

Is it possible for church councils to meet (electronically) without giving the usual 14 days notice?

During Covid-19 you can have a church council meeting within a week – Elizabeth Ovey

Is there an issue with using blower radiators in the church buildings?

The current guidance states:

‘If there are ceiling fans, air conditioning systems or heating systems which blow air, the current advice states that the need for an adequate supply of fresh air through natural or mechanical ventilation has not changed and that improving ventilation may help reduce the risk. Please refer to please refer to HSE’s Guidance on Ventilation or the CIBSE Covid-19 Ventilation Guidance.’ (13)

We expect there to be updated government guidelines closer to the time that will address heating systems during autumn and winter.

How do we clean in between users?

Good practice includes closing the toilet lid before you flush because there is some evidence to suggest that flushing can create an aerosol of fluid. There is a section on toilets in the national guidance for places of worship (2).

There is also cleaning guidance in cleaning in non-healthcare settings (7). If we wash our hands properly and don’t touch our face, the chances of this virus getting into us is really really low.

Having submitted a RA, should we expect a response or feedback, from District?

Not necessarily. We are asking for copies to be sent to [Kathleen](#) and she or a Chair will get in touch if your RA raises any concerns, but we are not signing them off at the District. That is a local decision for the Church Council.

Can the church hall be let out for events eg. birthday party, charity events while adhering to social distancing?

No. Government guidelines state: It remains the case that you should not:

- socialise indoors in groups of more than two households (anyone in your support bubble counts as one household) – this includes when dining out or going to the pub
- interact socially with anyone outside the group you are attending a place with, even if you see other people you know, for example, in a restaurant, community centre or place of worship
- hold or attend celebrations (such as parties) where it is difficult to maintain social distancing and avoid close social interaction – even if they are organised by businesses and venues that are taking steps to follow COVID-19 Secure guidelines

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do>

Useful links:

1. Methodist Church Guidance on face coverings:
<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18300/guide-for-face-coverings-7820.pdf>
2. Government Guidance on the safe use of place of worship (includes guidance on face masks, over 70s attending church, protective security etc):

<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>

3. Government guidance on how to use, make and wear face masks, where they must be worn, exemptions: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own#when-you-do-not-need-to-wear-a-face-covering>
4. Government guidance on how to make different environments Covid-secure: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>
5. Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Body warning on the use of temperature screening products: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dont-rely-on-temperature-screening-products-for-detection-of-coronavirus-covid-19-says-mhra>
6. Exemption from wearing face coverings badges:

For mobile phones:
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903452/Exemption from face covering badge for mobile phone.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903452/Exemption_from_face_covering_badge_for_mobile_phone.pdf)

Printable badges:
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903453/Exemption from face covering badge to print.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903453/Exemption_from_face_covering_badge_to_print.pdf)

Printable cards:
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903454/Exemption from face covering card to print.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903454/Exemption_from_face_covering_card_to_print.pdf)
7. Government guidance on cleaning in non-healthcare settings: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>
8. Government guidance on the use of multi-purpose community facilities (e.g. church halls) Includes information on cleaning, vulnerable people, multiple entry points and permitted activities: <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>
9. Statistical information on disparities in the risks and outcomes of Covid-19: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-review-of-disparities-in-risks-and-outcomes> (The core data where this is found is released every Thursday which includes charts and graphs and can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-covid-19-surveillance-reports>)
10. Methodist Church guidance on the use of cafes within church buildings: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18299/guide-for-cafes-in-your-church-building-10820.pdf>

11. Health and Safety Executive Guidance for air conditioning:
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/equipment-and-machinery/air-conditioning-and-ventilation.htm>
12. Government guidance for the disposal of face masks and PPE:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-disposing-of-waste>
13. Methodist Church Guidance for use of places of worship:
<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18434/guide-to-using-your-worship-space-18820.pdf>
14. Methodist Church Guidance for the cleaning of churches (inc use of hand dryers):
<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18435/cleaning-churches-during-covid-19-18820.pdf>
15. Methodist Church Guidance for weddings:
<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18432/guide-for-weddings-18820.pdf>
16. Methodist Church Guidance for funerals:
<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18433/guide-for-funerals-final-18820.pdf>