

Seventh-day Adventist® Church

NORTH ENGLAND CONFERENCE



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Pastors and First Elders

North England Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

22 December 2020

Re: Updated Guidance re: Re-opening of Churches

Dear Pastors and First Elders,

You will undoubtedly be aware of the government's latest round of announcements, which have culminated in more stringent local tiering arrangements being put in place with effect from Sunday 20 December 2020. Local restriction guidance must be adhered to at all times.

The published list of tier restrictions confirms that within the NEC territory, only Herefordshire in the West Midlands are in Tier 1 (Medium Alert) restrictions. Liverpool City Region, Warrington and Cheshire, Worcestershire, and Northamptonshire are in Tier 2 (High Alert) restrictions, with the remainder of our territory in Tier 3 (Very High Alert) restrictions. See: [Full list of local restriction tiers by area - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/full-list-of-local-restriction-tiers-by-area)

Explaining the Tiering System

The introduction of tiering is the government's commitment to ensuring the right levels of intervention are in the right places to manage outbreaks, suppress transmission of the virus. Congregations should read the detailed guidance regarding what you can and cannot do in each of the area's local restrictions. Churches should take steps to ensure that congregations understand and adhere to the guidance, particularly as failure to do so can lead to personal and local church prosecution.

Tier 2 guidance is available at: [Tier 2: High alert - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/tier-2-high-alert), with Tier 3 guidance at: [Tier 3: Very High alert - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/tier-3-very-high-alert). In addition, the NEC are committed to providing resources shortly to assist churches in understanding developments in government guidelines.

Safe Re-opening of Churches

Under the existing government guidelines, churches are permitted to open for worship and other services. To do this, congregations must:

1. determine whether the opening of your church for the service / event in question is essential and safe;
2. follow their area's local tier restrictions regarding social mixing;
3. adhere to the wearing of masks (unless exempted) and social distancing between households at all times whilst in the church building;
4. complete risk assessments with sufficient measures in advance of / for every occasion that your church is planned to be open;
5. ensure contact details of individuals attending any service / event are captured and made available if requested; and
6. follow strict government guidelines on how services are to be conducted (see below).

The following services are permitted to take place providing the conditions above are strictly maintained:

- **Weddings and Funerals.** Attendance at weddings¹ continue to be restricted to no more than 15 people, with funerals² restricted to no more than 30 people. Those officiating services are not included in these numbers.
- **Baptisms.** Baptismal services must be conducted according to strict guidelines³ regarding full immersion, namely always ensuring 2m social distancing (except when being immersed), and not cradling the person being immersed.
- **Broadcasting or filming an act of worship.** Attending churches for the purpose of broadcasting or filming an act of worship is permitted but should only involve individuals who are essential for the content of the service, including technicians, speakers / presenters, singers and musicians.
- **Essential voluntary or public services.** Churches can continue to open for the provision of meals, food banks or other support for the homeless or vulnerable people.

¹ Guidance for wedding ceremonies and receptions. [COVID-19: Guidance for wedding and civil partnership receptions and celebrations - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-guidance-for-wedding-and-civil-partnership-receptions-and-celebrations)

² Guidance for arranging and attending a funeral. [COVID-19: guidance for arranging or attending a funeral during the coronavirus pandemic - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-guidance-for-arranging-or-attending-a-funeral-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic)

³ Guidance on full immersion for baptisms. [COVID-19: guidance for the safe use of places of worship from 2 December - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-2-december)

Enforcing tiering restrictions and government guidelines

The current government guidelines apply to all churches using their building for regular religious ceremonies, and includes the use of surrounding grounds (e.g. car parks). It also applies to any premises rented by churches and used for religious gatherings.

Noticeably, the guidelines include statements regarding how the restrictions will be enforced. To not follow these legal limits is against the law and the police will have the powers to enforce these, including to issue fines (fixed penalty notices) of £200, doubling for further breaches up to a maximum of £6,400.

Similarly, failure to complete a risk assessment (for some events required by law) or having a risk assessment with insufficient measures set out could constitute a breach of Health & Safety legislation and the law. Serious breaches may result in serious fines and even imprisonment for up to 2 years. Importantly, any breach of guidelines and subsequent penalty would be the responsibility of the 'venue manager' of the building in question, which would effectively be the local Pastor and not the NEC.

We understand that a number of churches have been opening for the purpose of recording services for online broadcasting, and to continue the essential support of vulnerable individuals. We are in support of the continuation of these activities with the necessary protective measures being in place.

Given the continuing developments and uncertainty regarding transmission of the virus, the NEC are maintaining its position of advising churches to deter from opening for services other than those deemed essential until the situation becomes clearer. Where churches choose to conduct services, however, they must commit to and follow the strict guidelines as summarised above. We will continue to provide updates of any significant changes to the situation.

We wish to thank you for your continued dedication to keeping our congregations across the North England Conference safe during these unprecedented times. Despite the challenges, we remain assured and confident that *"The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge."* (Psalms 46:11). God continue to bless you all.

Yours sincerely



Pastor Richard Jackson

President, North England Conference