**COVID-19 Latest Information for Churches**

(Published 30 October 2020)

As has been clearly publicised, the UK is currently experiencing a public health emergency as a result of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, with reports of increasing infection rates provided by the government resulting in localised lockdown across the entire UK (see [Safe Use of Places of Worship](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) for details).

The North England Conference (NEC) some months ago took the unprecedented step of ceasing all face to face worship services for churches within our region. Although attempts were made to begin reopening churches in early September, in light of the current situation we are once again re-affirming that **churches should cease all face to face worship services until further notice.** This position will be maintained until we are satisfied that the risk to our congregations has reduced to an acceptable level of safety.

This decision was not taken lightly as we recognise that some of our members are anxious to return to face to face worship and many churches completed risk assessments in anticipation of this taking place. Like many of you, we had hoped that this would have been the case by now, however, we felt it was our primary responsibility to do all that we can to preserve the health and wellbeing of our entire congregations considering the following:

* the coming winter months will themselves bring an increase in illnesses;
* many of our members are identified in COVID-19 identified “at risk” groups; and
* we have a high number of members working in professions which both bring them into contact with the general public and / or are directly at the forefront of the pandemic.

We trust given the above you will better understand the rationale for our decision to maintain closure of our churches.

We wish to thank each of you for your continued dedication to the North England Conference, the delivery of services online and on social media platforms within your local churches, and above all your continued work within your communities during this difficult time.

**Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).**

***Q.*** *Are churches only closed for face to face worship? Are there other services and / or activities that the church can perform?*

**A.** Churches are to cease from face to face worship until further notice. They can, however, perform wedding, baby dedication and baptismal services, and continue community-based projects within their churches as detailed below. Churches should remember, however, that **only ‘essential’ services should be considered**, and be mindful of local lockdown measures which may prevent such events taking place when considering the safety of any plans being made.

* The performing of weddings within NEC churches is permissible, however, this can only be with a maximum of 15 persons in attendance, and the strict following appropriate government guidelines.
* Baptisms can be carried out, however, strict government guidelines must be followed – [see advice regarding full immersion](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#section6). In particular, the “cradling” of those being baptised is not permitted. We remain satisfied that baptism via emersion without being cradled is possible and our Pastors have been advised as to how this can be carried out.
* Where churches are engaged in community-based projects and welfare programmes which are intended to serve the mental and physical health of individuals, these important initiatives can continue in line with appropriate government guidelines.

***Q.*** *Why are SDA churches in the South of England and other denominations open for worship?*

**A.** In comparison to the SEC, the NEC unfortunately contains a high number of areas classified in the highest risk of infection transmission. Keeping churches closed until the risk to the health and wellbeing of congregations is at a safe level is, we believe, a responsible position.

We are of aware that some denominations have permitted face to face worship to resume, however, we note also the resulting infection rates of their members following their decision.

***Q.*** *Can the church be opened to conduct a funeral service?*

**A.** We are restricting the conducting of funeral services at the graveside only. No funeral services should be conducted in a church, thereby significantly reducing the gathering of individuals from disparate social bubbles inside a building. As advised PPE must be strictly worn by workers at all times, and should refrain from involvement in any funeral services where PPE is not available for use.

***Q.*** *Can the church be opened to record a Praise Team, focused discussion or speaker?*

**A.** Churches can be made available to limited groups of individuals for the purpose of pre-recording singing, small group discussion (e.g. a Sabbath School panel), or a guest speaker which will be aired at a later date. None of these activities should include a congregation, or constitute a face to face worship service. Any persons involved in pre-recording activities should ensure that they do so following all appropriate government guidelines.

***Q.*** *If a church wishes to resume face to face worship can they do so without the support of NEC?*

**A.** We are aware that some churches within the NEC are keen to resume face to face worship and may be taking approaches that may conflict the advice provided and processes put in place by NEC. We wish to reiterate that opening a church without the endorsement of NEC is not supported by the organisation, and we are therefore imploring each church to ensure that such actions do not take place.

The risks and liabilities of such a course of action are significant, and should a church take the decision to resume face to face worship against clear and reasoned mandates, the NEC cannot and will not be responsible for any adverse outcomes that may result from that decision.

***Q.*** *Given the current situation, should churches simply suspend making any plans to re-open?*

**A.** No. Churches should take the opportunity to continue risk assessing their building and arrangements, and making any alterations as necessary. In addition, churches should also use the time as an opportunity to redefine how we interact with our community as a result of this pandemic - making online services as relevant and far reaching as possible.

***Q.*** *Where can churches find general information about COVID-19 that is prepared by our faith?*

**A.** Comprehensive advice from Adventist Risk Management with useful links relating to the re-opening of churches can be found here: [Information Regarding COVID-19](https://adventistrisk.org/en-gb/safety-resources/information-regarding-coronavirus) (10 August 2020).

***Q.*** *Where can churches find up to date government advice for places of worship?*

**A.** Please see the UK Government checklist for [Special Religious Services and Gatherings](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/special-religious-services-and-gatherings-covid-19-checklist) (16 October 2020).

***Q.*** *Where can churches find government updates about local lockdown measures?*

# A. Before attending any church, holding any religious event or visiting another household, churches should check whether there are any [geographic lockdown measures being introduced within your local area](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-covid-alert-levels-what-you-need-to-know). There are 3 Local COVID Alert Levels – Medium, High and Very High.

# Members can enter their Post Code in the [‘Find out the coronavirus restrictions in a local area’](https://www.gov.uk/find-coronavirus-local-restrictions) website to find out what they can and cannot do.

***Q.*** *What should members do if they feel unwell at this time?*

**A.** If a member is unwell or has any of the [main symptoms of coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection) - a new continuous cough, a high temperature or loss or change to their sense of smell or taste – they should get a test immediately and stay at home where they should isolate. They must not invite anyone to their house and not leave their home. They should not prepare food for others.

***“****But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”*Isaiah 40:31