

## **“My Church in in Tier 4 or in Lockdown – should we stay open for worship?”**

The law and Government guidance says that yes, your church may remain open for public worship. However, as Synod Moderator, **I strongly recommend that you should cease in-person worship until your Tier level decreases.**

Neither the Synod nor the Moderators nor even General Assembly can order your church to close because of the pandemic. However, for some months the Synod Moderators have urged churches to consider not what they *may* do, but what they *should* do. You know the statistical evidence as well as I do: this second wave is now more serious than the first wave, and hundreds of people across England are dying every day as a result of Coronavirus.

As “Covid-secure” buildings, churches are supposed to be safe places to meet. But the truth is that whenever people from different households gather, the risk of cross-infection increases. Unlike the first wave of the pandemic, a very significant number of people with a positive Covid-test result (some estimates say 1 in every 3) are not displaying symptoms. It is increasingly likely that we will come into contact with someone who may pass the virus to us without realising that they were infected themselves. To put it another way, there is a real possibility that you may be Covid-positive without knowing it, or the person just ahead of you on the way into church is, and whoever becomes infected as a result of you both being in church together may suffer considerably more than the carrier, perhaps even with a fatal result. It is still true that the older one is, the more likely it will be that any Covid infection will be more serious. The same is true for anyone with underlying health conditions, and those from Black and Minority Ethnic communities. It is a risk that I believe is not worth taking.

If your Elders’ Meeting (or the equivalent council in an LEP) decides that the church should remain open, there are some steps that you really must follow:

- 1) Revisit your Risk Assessment and update it. The risk of someone attending without knowing they have the virus has increased.
- 2) Display the symptoms of Covid clearly on a poster near the door, and make sure that your stewards/welcomers are ready to ask people if they think they may have been in contact with the disease, and to ask anyone with symptoms or who thinks they may have been in contact with the disease, to return home and not come into church.
- 3) Make sure that everyone is wearing a face covering at all times, unless they have a medical exemption. (“I don’t like them,” is not grounds for not wearing one, and neither is, “I think it’s a lot of fuss about nothing”, nor is, “You know me, I’m ok,” and certainly not, “It’s all blown up out of proportion and it’s a myth put about by the Government to control us all”!)
- 4) Face coverings must cover the mouth AND the nose and people must be (politely) challenged over non-compliance.
- 5) When a person leading or contributing to worship is at the lectern/in front of a microphone, then and only then may they remove their face covering, and they must replace it before they leave that spot. It is NOT acceptable to leave their face covering in their seat, walk up the aisle and then give the Bible reading.
- 6) There must be strict social distancing of 2m between households at all times.
- 7) Households must not socialise with other households even briefly whilst on church premises, indoors or outdoors, even socially distanced.

I don’t want to unduly alarm anyone, least of all Elders who are already under severe pressure because of the drop in income and everything else associated with the pandemic. However, it is

important to remind you and emphasise that failing in your duty to keep the building (and anyone using it) as safe as you possibly can is likely to be a breach of Health and Safety law. The last thing we would want is the added stress of prosecutions.

**I want to be clear that any minister or lay preacher who, out of care for themselves and others, chooses NOT to lead in-person worship at this time will have my full support, and will certainly not be subject to discipline for this reason.** Elders' Meetings (and equivalent councils in LEPs) must not put pressure on people to act against their conscience on this matter, and they must have particular regard for the safety and wellbeing of anyone they wish to invite to lead worship, not putting them at undue risk. This specifically includes, but it isn't limited to, those at increased risk because of age, health condition and ethnicity.

I do also understand that in some very localised areas the infection rates will be noticeably lower than in neighbouring towns and communities. Please don't be complacent about this – that situation is constantly changing. The fact that the latest published numbers for your community are lower than others doesn't mean that is the case even today, let alone tomorrow.

Finally, I know that some of our churches will find it easier to move to online worship than others, or to distribute paper-based worship resources. I would remind you that the URC are still providing both a daily devotion and a weekly act of worship, available online at <https://devotions.urc.org.uk/> I am also aware of the need to be in human contact to overcome loneliness: even a daily phone call isn't the same as meeting them in person in church, but it will make a difference.

Yet in all this, we know that there is hope. There is perpetual hope in Christ – God-with-us always, to the very end of the age. There is also hope in the vaccines currently being deployed. This situation will not last forever, but I do urge you to take all reasonable steps to endure these last few months. The pandemic will end; it will be safe to meet one another again. Let's redouble our efforts to care for one another both in the things we refrain from doing and in the countless acts of kindness that so many have displayed throughout 2020.

My prayers for you continue.

Steve Faber  
Synod Moderator  
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