



COVID - 19

Guidelines & Risk Assessment for Opening Church Worship activities.

St Johns Mar Thoma Church UK.

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REGISTERED CHARITY NO: 1060532.

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Last Updated	23 rd June 2021.
Version	4

This guidance is prepared for St Johns Mar Thoma Church, Hounslow with reference to COVID-19 to its own specific circumstances, including its size and type of activities. The document is prepared by referring to the guidelines given by the UK government.

Guidelines Approving Authority

1. Charity trustees of St Johns Mar Thoma Church

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Introduction

The UK is currently experiencing a public health emergency as a result of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The transmission characteristics of COVID-19 are outlined by Public Health England. The transmission of COVID-19 is thought to occur mainly through respiratory droplets generated by coughing and sneezing, and through contact with contaminated surfaces. The predominant modes of transmission are assumed to be droplet and contact. This guidance for places of worship has been drafted on the basis of the scientific evidence available and will be updated as necessary as more data becomes available on this novel virus.

Places of worship play an important role in providing spiritual leadership for many individuals, and in bringing communities and generations together. However, their communal nature also makes them places that are particularly vulnerable to the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Purpose of this guidance

This guidance is designed to assist in the opening of our church service including broad range of worship activities in accordance with the associated legislation. The guidance sets out how this can be done in a manner that is COVID-19 secure and in line with social distance guidelines, in order to minimise the risk of exposure to infection.

This document will be revised according to the UK government periodic updates.

Key principles for safely opening the parish for services

The COVID-19 Protocol Officer will have discretion over when it is safe to open and should decide to remain closed if they are not able to safely adhere to the guidelines outlined below.

Our Charity Trustees should therefore be aware of their responsibilities under existing health and safety law. Our Trustees also have a duty of care to protect our church members/volunteers/visitors, to ensure that as far as reasonably practicable they are not exposed to risks to their health and safety.

Consideration should be given to how fair and equal access can safely be provided for all users to be able to undertake faith practices within a place of worship, in line with government guidelines and considering requirements under the **Equality Act 2010** where these apply.

The COVID-19 Protocol Officer is strongly advised to take action to minimise the potential for spreading of COVID-19 among worshippers, and those working or volunteering within the building and surrounding grounds. You may want to engage worshippers in co-designing an informal community behaviour agreement.

The COVID-19 Protocol Officer should take all possible steps to secure the safety of the public, ensuring that gathering limits where set locally are adhered to, and where the advised limit is set in this guidance is as per the UK Govt. rule.

The use of shared items:

Individuals should be prevented from touching or kissing objects that are handled communally. Barriers and/or clear signage should be put in place where necessary to avoid this taking place. Individuals should also avoid touching property belonging to others such as shoes which, if removed, should be placed and collected by their owner while adhering to social distancing principles.

Reusable and communal resources such as prayer mats, service sheets, religious texts or devotional material should be removed from use. Single use alternatives should be provided as long as they are removed and disposed of by the worshipper.

Items owned by the individual to aid worship such as a prayer mat or religious text, can be brought in but should be removed again by the worshipper.

In circumstances where worshippers cannot bring their own books, places of worship should keep a selection of clean books for individuals to use. Clean books should be quarantined for 48 hours since their previous use and should be quarantined for 48 hours again after use. Items which cannot be easily cleaned should also be subject to the 48 hour quarantine after use.

Food and Drink/Distance/Face Covering.

- **No food or drink should be consumed in the Church. (Strictly prohibited.)**
 - **Keep a safe distance from others. Stay two metres apart from people you do not live with as much as possible.**
 - **You should wear a face covering all the time inside and outside the Church. Nobody is allowed inside the church without a face covering.**

Singing, chanting and the use of musical instruments

COVID-19 spreads from person to person through small droplets, aerosols and through direct contact. Singing, playing some musical instruments, shouting and physical activity increases the risk of transmission through small droplets and aerosols. Safeguards should be put in place to minimise opportunities for the virus to spread.

Where singing or chanting is essential to an act of worship, this should be limited to one person wherever possible. Exceptionally, where it is essential to the service, up to six individuals should be permitted to do so. Strict social distancing should be observed and the use of Plexi-glass screens should be considered to protect worshippers, and each other.

Communal singing should not take place. This applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are used. Chanting, shouting and/or playing of instruments that are blown into should also be avoided in communal worship and in rehearsals.

What the congregation can do

- ***People should avoid singing, shouting and raising voices.*** This is because of the potential for increased risk of transmission from aerosol and droplets.
- **Activities such as singing, chanting, shouting and/or playing of instruments that are blown into should be specifically avoided by congregations/worshippers.** 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.
- **Therefore, spoken responses during worship should also not be in a raised voice.**

Weddings events

- It is strongly advised that only essential aspects of the ceremonies take place at this time.
- **No food or drink should be consumed** as a part of the event unless required for the purposes of solemnisation.
- Worshippers should maintain social distancing.
- Wedding receptions or parties should take place under strict COVID-19 guidelines.

Sacramental Use of water:

- Any pre-requisite washing/ablution rituals should not be done at the place of worship but carried out prior to arrival.
 - In rare circumstances where it is necessary, washing facilities within the place of worship should be used in line with social distancing guidelines and hygiene measures applied.
 - People should not wash the body parts of others.
 - Where rituals or ceremonies require water to be applied to the body others present should move out of range of any potential splashing.
 - Where an infant is involved a parent/guardian or other member of the infant's regular household should hold the infant.
 - All individuals involved should thoroughly wash their hands before and after and ensure good hygiene.
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Full immersion:

- Where full immersion in water is necessary as part of a ritual or ceremony, this should be very carefully planned following the rules below.
- Those being immersed should be at least 2 metres away from the congregation and officiants at all times, except while they are being immersed.
- Only one person should be immersed at any time and they should only be attended by a single officiant/clergy member.
- During the immersion, clergy/the officiant can place their hands on the head of the person being immersed, but they should not 'cradle' the person or touch them in any other way
- Clergy/the officiant should wash their hands after each person is immersed, or if this isn't possible they should use hand sanitiser.

Young people and children attending the place of worship:

Young people and children should be supervised by the parent or guardian. They should wash hands thoroughly for 20 seconds with running water and soap and dry them thoroughly or use hand sanitiser ensuring that all parts of the hands are covered. Places of worship can help remind children and young people, and their parents and guardians, of the important actions they should take during the COVID-19 outbreak to help prevent the spread of the virus.

Test and Trace

The government has launched an NHS Test and Trace service to manage the risk of the virus re-emerging. The service:

- provides testing for anyone who has symptoms of coronavirus to find out if they have the virus
- gets in touch with anyone who has had a positive test result to help them share information about any close recent contacts they have had
- alerts those contacts, where necessary, and notifies them they need to self-isolate to help stop the spread of the virus
- Further information can be found online including for contacts of people with possible or confirmed COVID-19 infection who do not live with the person and for places of work.

In line with other government guidance, you should assist this service by keeping an accurate record of attendees / visitors for 21 days, in a way that is manageable for your place of worship, and assist NHS Test and Trace with requests for that data if needed for contact tracing and the investigation of local outbreaks. You can find further guidance on maintaining records of staff, customers and visitors to support NHS Test and Trace.

When collecting the names and contact details of people attending your place of worship, you should ask for their consent. This is because of the potentially sensitive nature of the data collected in these circumstances, which is protected by law. Guidance on collecting visitor details

for Test and Trace, including issues around consent, is provided by the Information Commissioner's Office. You should make clear that giving contact details is optional and is not a condition of attending your place of worship.

Other actions to take to reduce the risk of transmission to support social distancing could include:

- Those leading the worship reminding the importance of social distancing and hygiene.
- Introducing a one-way flow in and out of the premises with appropriate floor markings or signage, with restrictions on accessing non-essential areas. At the end of worship, this could include worshippers leaving one row at a time, in order to prevent crowding at entry or exit points. **All worshippers should leave the church premises immediately after the service.**
- Multiple entry points could be opened, and clear signposting or assistance could be offered to guide worshippers and to avoid congestion.
- Using screens, barriers or alternative rooms and spaces to separate worshippers.
- Any changes to entrances, exits and queues should take into account reasonable adjustments to accommodate those who need them, such as worshippers with physical disabilities.
- We are introducing a booking system to help with managing numbers.
- Following the guidance on hand hygiene:
 - Wash your hands more often than usual, for 20 seconds using soap and water or hand sanitiser, particularly after coughing, sneezing and blowing your nose, or after being in public areas.
 - When you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue, or the crook of your sleeved arm (not your hands) if you don't have a tissue, and throw the tissue away hygienically immediately afterwards. Then wash your hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and water or hand sanitiser if hand washing facilities are not available.
- The above advice on social distancing also applies when travelling to and from a place of worship. Guidance on social distancing relevant to transport, parking and the public realm should be followed as per the government guidelines.

People who are symptomatic

Anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19 (a new continuous cough, a high temperature or a loss of, or change in, their normal sense of taste or smell) should not attend the place of worship due to the risk that they pose to others; they should self-isolate at home immediately with other members of their household. Remote participation should be considered, for example by live streaming. This applies equally to individuals who work at the place of worship.

Individuals who are self-isolating due to a possible or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the household

Where individuals are self-isolating due to a possible or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the household, or because they have been requested to so by NHS Test & Trace, they should participate remotely. See stay at home guidance for households with possible or confirmed COVID-19. Guidance is different for funerals, see guidance on managing a funeral during the coronavirus pandemic here.

Hygiene

- On entering and leaving a place of worship, everyone, including staff, should be asked to wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and water or to use hand sanitiser if hand washing facilities are not available. **A Public Health England poster can be downloaded from their coronavirus resources page.**
- There should be signs and posters to build awareness of good handwashing technique, the need to increase handwashing frequency, avoid touching your face and to cough or sneeze into a tissue which is binned safely, or into the crook of your sleeved arm if a tissue is not available.
- **You should provide hand sanitiser in multiple locations in addition to toilet facilities.**

Cleaning

- All surfaces, especially those most frequently touched such as door handles and rails, should be regularly cleaned using standard cleaning products. See guidance. Sufficient time needs to be allowed for this cleaning to take place, particularly before reopening for the first time. Frequently used objects, surfaces or spaces, including for example doorways between outside and inside spaces should be given particular attention when cleaning.
- A decision should be made locally on how frequently cleaning should take place based on an assessment of risk and use of the building.

Protecting the vulnerable:

There should be a particular focus on protecting people who are clinically vulnerable and more likely to develop severe illness. Actions should include:

Religious leaders, lay people, family, volunteers, staff and members of the public, including children, staying at home and self-isolating if they have a new, continuous cough or a high temperature or loss of or change to sense of smell or taste. This is to minimise risk of spread of COVID-19 to friends, the wider community, and particularly the vulnerable.

If anyone becomes unwell with symptoms of COVID-19 in a place of worship they should go home immediately and be advised to follow the stay at home guidance, which covers NHS Test and Trace. If they need clinical advice, they should go online to NHS 111 (or call 111 if they don't have internet access). In an emergency, call 999 if they are seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk. They should not visit the GP, pharmacy, urgent care centre or a hospital.

Other people who may have been in contact with the person who has become unwell should wash their hands thoroughly after the interaction, but they do not need to take any other specific action unless they develop symptoms themselves or are advised to do so by NHS Test and Trace. If they do develop symptoms they should follow the stay at home guidance.

Individuals aged 70 years and over attending the place of worship

- 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.

Enforcement:

It is important to be aware of the enforcement provisions, as is the case for other sectors.

Under existing Health & Safety legislation, failure to complete a risk assessment that accounts for Covid-19 could constitute a breach of that legislation, as could having a risk assessment with insufficient measures. The actions the enforcing authority can take include the provision of specific advice to employers to support them to achieve the required standard, through to issuing enforcement notices to help secure improvements. **Serious breaches and failure to comply with enforcement notices can constitute a criminal offence, with serious fines and even imprisonment for up to 2 years.**

However, inspectors are carrying out compliance checks nationwide to ensure that Trustees are taking the necessary steps.

Guidelines of gatherings and attendees for Services, Sacramental ceremonies

After measuring, analysing the space capacity of the church and keeping 1m distance, there is possibility of permitting up to 85 people. This will include places of worship and their surrounding premises. The attendees should come 15 minutes before the service and leave promptly after the service.

Risk and Liabilities.

Attending church service is your own risk and your decision and you have to protect yourself from any risk. St Johns Mar Thoma Church trustees are not liable for any consequence.
