

UK Unitarian and Free Christians – Worshipping in Person Update June 2020

This guidance is for England only; Scotland is likely to review re-opening on the 9th July and Wales within a similar timescale.

Introduction

We are aware that the situation regarding re-opening of buildings for worship is rather unclear. The government plan indicates that churches, chapels and places of worship can open from 4 July, they have since announced that now on the 15th June 'individual prayer' can be carried out in at a worship building. This, however, is not an instruction or requirement to re-open buildings for worship, it is merely a statement that the government has assumed it is safe by this date, if the 5 tests it is currently using to measure the severity of the coronavirus pandemic situation are met. What has become clear is that the science and the politics relating to Covid 19 are subject to multiple interpretations.

We intend here to provide guidance to congregations and fellowships who are considering resuming meeting in person for worship, including re-opening buildings for indoor services, and holding outdoor services. (Throughout this guidance we have referred to 'congregations'; this includes fellowships, societies, and other forms of Unitarian and Free Christian groups.).

It is not an endorsement or request to reopen congregations, rather a discussion document for congregations to consider all the issues, and seek the most appropriate form of worship and spiritual support, that respects and values the safety and health of all the congregational members and the community in which they belong.

What does the congregation need and how may it be met safely?

Our aim with this guidance is to support congregations in deciding how best to meet their community's spiritual needs during this time, including considering whether resuming worship in person and re-opening buildings for worship should form part of this as lockdown restrictions ease.

Local circumstances, local knowledge, the feelings of the congregation and local community will all form part of the intelligence that can inform each specific community's decision-making. We have a particularly vulnerable demographic (in terms of age and health profiles) both in our congregations and within leadership roles and it may be appropriate to view this remaining year as one consisting of predominantly 'virtual worship' as the American UUA are promoting, whether online or by methods such as CD recordings and posted services.

We would recommend that prior to any decision to re-open buildings for worship, the congregation discusses what the current spiritual needs of the community are, and how they can best be met without any risks to members' physical health and safety. This should be informed by an awareness of:

- what would be required to open buildings safely and in line with government guidance. We have provided guidance on this below. Trustees and committee members may wish to carry out an assessment of what the practical implications of re-opening buildings for worship would be in terms of layout, cleansing requirements,

how attendees would travel to and from worship, whether common activities such as singing incur a greater risk of transmitting coronavirus, and related issues. The volunteers that will be needed to ensure cleaning is carried out to a standard that meets the Covid Secure requirements.

- all possible options for meeting people's spiritual needs at this moment. Much work has been done on this since the pandemic started, and we would encourage readers to become familiar with the resources available to support different forms of ministry, sessions for the recent 'ministry in the pandemic' and a selection of links from the UUA <https://www.uua.org/safe/pandemics>. For example, many congregations have adopted online worship using recorded videos or live video services. Others have used offline methods such as recording services on CD or cassette, regular print newsletters, posting and emailing out services in time for every member to read through them at a set time, and other techniques.

*Shrewsbury Unitarians have distributed their services via USB sticks and providing a simple machine to play it back, as used by the talking newspapers etc.

Sonic 2 USB Memory Stick Player and Bluetooth Speaker

https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B07FMWJFYW/ref=cm_sw_r_other_apai_xDL3Eb4DKHA7B

- how equality of access to worship can be maintained. There is a legitimate concern that people who are not able or prefer not to access online worship are not having their spiritual needs met to the same extent of those who can easily go online. However, resuming in-person worship carries a similar risk in that those in high-risk groups (such as over-70s and people with pre-existing health conditions) could be excluded from worship due to a need to take extra precautions to avoid contracting coronavirus. The ability for us to ensure we support and carry all our congregations should mean we place the same importance on the equality of access as we will have on any re-opening plan.
- **It would also be worthwhile to consider how the decision to resume in-person worship would be perceived by the congregation. Would individuals feel a social pressure to attend? Might people in at-risk groups make an assumption that "if they're re-opening, it must be safe for me to attend?" These are issues that need to be resolved sensitively through discussion with the congregation.**

Our recommendation is to create a form of ministry that minimises physical risks and seeks to move at the pace and with the sensitivity to the most at risk in the congregation and leadership.

The engagement of the congregation and the clear communication of any requirements and guidance will be key to safely operating should you decide to re-open the building or meet for outdoor worship. The decision to open once the legal closure is lifted will be yours; support will be available to help undertake a risk assessment. Clearly this note will be superseded by government advice when published but it does provide some pointers for early thought on the matter.

Background

1 COVID-19 – Opening places of worship

- 1.1 The UK Government announced on 23 March the closure of a range of buildings including places of worship. Some exemptions were made in relation to the use of places of worship for funerals and hosting essential voluntary or public service, such as food banks, homeless services and blood donation sessions. Its guidance of that time, as shortly thereafter updated, can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close-guidance>.
- a) UK Government in relation to England
- 1.2 On 11 May, the UK Government published its plans for the next steps on responding to COVID-19 in England: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-plan-to-rebuild-the-uk-governments-covid-19-recovery-strategy>. Within this, as Step 3, the Government speaks of an ambition to reopen places of worship. However, this is expected to be no earlier than 4 July, subject to further scientific advice.
- 1.3 On 15 May, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Robert Jenrick, announced that the Government was setting up a task force to look at how to safely reopen places of worship, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-taskforce-developing-plan-to-reopen-places-of-worship> saying that “Faith leaders and government have agreed to develop a plan to enable the phased and safe reopening of places of worship when the evidence shows it is the right time to do so”.
- 1.4 Faith Minister Lord Greenhalgh was quoted thus in the release: “Places of worship serve an important role in supporting and providing spiritual leadership for this country’s diverse communities, and in bringing communities and the generations together; but this also makes them places that are currently particularly vulnerable to the spread of the pandemic” and “We realise that practical issues, such as the size of both physical buildings and congregation, are significant, but we are determined to find a way to safely reopen places of worship as soon as possible, ensuring people are not put at risk.”
- 1.5 The Taskforce will produce guidance jointly with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to support places of worship across England to reopen safely.

We are currently awaiting the report from the Taskforce

Considerations for re-opening buildings

The Government may on 4 July remove the restriction to opening places of worship depending on the perceived level as defined by the 5 tests. **However, the decision to re-open buildings remains firmly with the congregational and building trustees.** The **precautionary principle** (“when an activity raises threats of harm to human health... precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause-and-effect relationships are not fully established scientifically”) should be at the forefront of this decision process. At all times, if it becomes apparent that a particular change (such as introducing a one-way

system) is necessary for safety, but the building's layout does not permit this, the precautionary principle should be adhered to. It is unlikely that we will return to how life, including worship, was before the pandemic, and transitional arrangements will be in place for a while.

You will need to ensure you adhere to Government instructions and, importantly, to any conditions / requirements that your insurance company might impose. Please contact them to check. This is particularly important if you are thinking of having multiple groups using the Chapel or Halls, as well as any services.

Practical steps such as flushing the water system, running any taps, etc. for five minutes to remove any risk of Legionella or other bacterial build-up should be undertaken.

An initial deep clean should be planned, especially if there is evidence of bat or animal activity while the building has not been used.

We are anticipating some form of risk assessment will need to be undertaken and these should be carried out in-line with the 'Covid Secure' guidelines that the taskforce we are putting together to guide Unitarian congregations on this will produce. An example from the retail sector can be found here:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5eb9703de90e07082fa57ce0/working-safely-during-covid-19-shops-branches-v1.1-250520.pdf>

This should consider the layout of the building with regard to social distancing, the demographic of the congregation, and the ability to provide services via other methods as discussed above. (As an indication a large town parish church with a capacity of 350 has actually found only 24 individuals can be safely accommodated in line with spacing requirements)

When planning for how those social distancing measures can be implemented, be aware that this may mean marking distances with tape or chalk, closing off pews or changing chair layouts. You should also consider whether it would be advisable to implement a one-way system to regulate movement through the building. If it is, but the building would not permit this, it may not be advisable to re-open for in-person worship.

Toilets will require additional cleaning on a regular basis, with users having to wipe down surfaces after every use. This also involves a consideration of whether every user is equally able to do this (for example, some people with disabilities or limited physical movement may be unable to do this) and, if not, whether it will be necessary to have someone available to carry this out after each use.

You may wish to consider restricting access to certain parts of the building to minimise the area to clean.

Cleaning

You should be able to use your regular cleaning products for the usual areas of the building. However, it is likely that those cleaning will need to be provided with appropriate PPE such as gloves and masks.

Hand-washing facilities should be provided and may need to be enhanced with sanitising stations to provide additional capacity. Paper towels are currently recommended rather than cloth towels or air dryers, as these latter may disperse droplets containing the virus into the air.

Historic England advises that historic parts of the building can be cleaned with a dilute solution of non-ionic conservation-grade detergent or sensitive washing up liquid and

distilled water, rinsed with distilled water and dried with paper towels. Examples of conservation grade non-ionic cleaners include: Orvus WA paste, Dehypon LS45, and Synperonic 91/6. Wipes with alcohol should be avoided.

Movement to, from, and through the building

You may wish consider how you might be able to prop open any doors to minimise contact with door handles. However, do this only if it does not contravene Fire Safety regulations.

Consider Engaged / Vacant signage to limit numbers into toilets and cleaning stations. You will need to display posters to increase awareness of handwashing techniques and good hygiene practice. These are readily available online.

Thought should be given to social distancing arrangements in corridors, aisles and at entrances and exits. If this cannot be maintained, it will not be possible to re-open the building.

You should also consider how people might need to travel to the building, and we would advise maintaining familiarity with regulations and guidance relating to transport – such as requirements to wear face masks on public transport, not sharing car journeys with those from other households, and so forth. Options for managing this could include changing service times, or having additional services to reduce attendance. However, the needs of ministers and volunteers, and other resource considerations such as the cost of heating and lighting, will need to inform such decisions.

External Hirers

An area that is of significant interest to congregations is when they can resume external lettings.

In theory, from 4 July 2020 these could resume. However, they will need a specific risk assessment, an agreement on how social distancing impacts on the maximum numbers that a room or hall can accommodate, what additional cleaning and caretaking arrangements will need to be in place, and the responsibility and liability for those tasks, including who should bear any additional costs.

Thought will need to be given as to how best to allow for sufficient gaps between external hirers to enable cleaning, etc. It might also be a useful time to review past practices and instigate more auditable processes for when you do accept external hirers. For example: do the groups have their own public liability, do they have safeguarding and health and safety policies, are they aware and comply with the chapel's policies, and so forth?

You will wish to consider if your current cleaning arrangements are best suited to the enhanced level required to open. Should you engage a professional company for a deep clean, are the current arrangements able to be scaled up and when will conversations need to be held with staff or volunteers?

Open Air Services

There has been some discussion of holding open-air services. In theory this could more easily allow for social distancing. However, issues around toilet use, refreshment provision, concerns over singing, travel to and from services, seating (would attendees need to provide their own seats to minimise transmission risks?) and so forth would still

exist. There will also be considerations of equality of access to worship – will the needs of those unable to attend an open-air services (such as with health-conditions or who are elderly) be properly met? This will more fully explored in the task force guidelines.

Weddings and Funerals

Both wedding and funeral services await task force clarification at this point, as we await further guidance from central government.

Conclusion

It is clear that this has not just been a tragic pause in the normal, but an opportunity to explore a new landscape of how we minister to communities, operate our buildings, and use our resources. Early feedback from the 'Being Together' and 'Ministry in a Pandemic' online events indicated an appetite from both service leaders and congregation members for using new approaches - including blending them with traditional ways of worship - and considering how we might develop our ministry in ways that suit our needs in the 21st century.

Furthermore, we must consider how new ways of worshipping and gathering might meet the needs of those who could benefit from our movement and join us, but who have yet to encounter us. This is an incredibly challenging time, but congregations everywhere have strived to meet it, often in the face of loss and grief. We will continue to support them to do so.