

# Emerging into the “new normal”

**To the Saints who make up the United Reformed Church across England, Scotland, Wales, Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man: greetings.**

It is over 3 months since we entered lockdown, embarking on a new way of life, including for our churches. We have been moved and impressed by the creative ministries of so many who have adapted through these times to different expressions of Christian community, including worship, pastoral care and community outreach. Some of our churches have really struggled, and that is very understandable, others have perhaps surprised themselves, finding that they are flourishing in new ways. **Thank you for anything and everything that you have been able to do in the service of God** – we are truly grateful to you.

We have travelled along a hard road through the pandemic, and it is abundantly clear that the journey is not over yet. If an effective vaccine can be developed, it will still be many months before this is deployed in a sufficient proportion of the population, and we must take extraordinary care over our part to prevent further mass outbreaks. It is possible that lockdown restrictions will be imposed again, either across the UK, or in some of the countries and islands where the URC is present, or regionally or even more locally.

Whilst the UK moved very much as a whole into lockdown, it is apparent that the governments of the lands in which the URC gather are making easing restrictions in different rates and at different times.

**We must be careful to follow all regulation and guidance that is in place from time to time. Changes in Government policy will take place regularly. This document provides the basis for further local discussion and some clear church policy. If the advice and policy in here are not as restrictive as your government’s policy that is currently in place, you MUST follow the official advice and regulation. In some places the guidance contained in this paper may be more restrictive or appear to be more burdensome than official policy requires. Where that is the case, it is because the church has judged that greater caution is wise.**

If the regulation and guidance where you live is more permissive in terms of easing restrictions that in other parts where the URC operates, you should not feel obliged to move towards that more permissive approach. There may be other factors which lead the wise church to proceed with easing restrictions with greater caution.

**The Pandemic is not over, and we must show loving actions to all through doing what we can to minimise the risk of infection from our premises and our people.**

We have produced “Emerging into the ‘New Normal’” to help your church community consider your next steps. **We want to urge continuing caution.** There is no need to rush back into the familiar – the old patterns and habits – and **there is no race to see who will open first.** We hope that this document may help your church to take stock and to re-focus on what matters most of God and to you (in that order!)

The Synod Moderators

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**As lockdown from the Coronavirus pandemic eases across the territories in which the United Reformed Church operates, we must still be asking, “What MUST resume, what SHOULDN’T, and what might we do differently?”**

**Different people will need to consider the questions posed here at different points.**



Some relate most closely to the **Minister**/Elder in Local Leadership (ELL)



Some questions relate to the functions of the **Elders’ Meeting** (which includes your Minister/ELL).



Some need the involvement of the whole **Church Meeting**.

Inevitably, in our conciliar governance, there will be overlap in the consideration and in making decisions. Remember that you are not alone in this. Your Synod Officers are available to help you.

## SUMMARY

This document updates and replace “Ready for the New Normal.” It has been prepared by the Synod Moderators to reflect the changes about to take place as coronavirus lockdown restrictions are eased and it becomes possible for places of worship to re-open. To do this, we **MUST** plan our course of action.

Before any church may re-open for private prayer, public worship and other activities, you **MUST**:

- Carry out a Covid-19 Risk Assessment (the URC have produced an updated template to help you do this.)
- Develop cleaning, hand-washing and hygiene procedures
- Maintain appropriate physical distancing measures for the foreseeable future
- Put in place measures to manage virus transmission risks especially where 2 metre distancing cannot be maintained, and where reduced distancing is allowed by government regulation.

Take steps to show your duty of care to ministers, elders, employees, volunteers, members, associates and members of the wider public. We cannot police everyone’s actions but we can take responsibility for our own. For those that remain at greater risk from the virus, we will be acting lovingly if we remind them of the need for continued caution, which may well include them taking personal medical advice and acting upon it.

Just because we may soon open for “business”, it does not mean that we **should**. Consider everyone’s needs and open when it is right for your church.

The risk for catching coronavirus depends primarily on two factors: the **level of exposure** to the virus multiplied by the **length of time** you are exposed. Professor Erin Bromage’s blog at <https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them> explains this well.

The 1980s US police drama “Hill Street Blues” started with the duty sergeant briefing officers before they commenced their patrol, and he ended his briefing with these words:  
**“Let’s be careful out there!”**

## 1 – Surveying the Landscape

### Facing an uncertain future

We know something now of the impact that Coronavirus has had on our churches, that is the people who are our churches. We know too that some have been able to weather the storm better than others. Some congregations have been hit hard by the loss of loved ones.

We have a significant proportion in our fellowships who will need to exercise significant care against the virus for a long time to come, because the risks they face if they were to become infected are greater than for others who might catch the disease. Be careful to think about how our actions might have a significant impact on those who are more vulnerable.

Almost all of our churches are anxious about how they will continue to pay the bills, after many months of reduced income from letting income and in many cases members' giving.

Where key members of our fellowships have died or will be unable to pick up the same level of involvement, we know that a number of churches that were already feeling that they were at the edge may find that they will have to face the reality of closing.

It is important that we acknowledge all of these challenges and threats, and deal with them honestly. Many of these situations will bring us into hard conversations that we would each rather avoid. Because the world has changed, we cannot avoid them, and it is going to be healthier for everyone concerned to face up to this. Do ask for help!

Your Synod officers may well be able to help you with understanding your next steps and in thinking strategically about where you are heading.

“Ready for the New Normal” encouraged churches to ponder on and discuss some key questions. Some of those are repeated here, some are replaced or updated, and some material is new to this document.

Approach the questions prayerfully and in hope. Even those churches that are finding their days of witness and service are drawing towards a close will benefit from careful reflection. Remember that God's Church is not closing – God's work continues even if we are not called to serve in a different way.

Despite the pain caused by this global crisis, and sometimes because of it, there have been good things that have already emerged. The Church has connected with new people and with people who had drifted away from church involvement. We have learnt about personal and corporate resilience. In most places we have discovered how we can better share in the ministry of pastoral care. We have seen how people have responded with wonderful expressions of care for and service of others. There is much to be glad about in this new landscape, as well as being honest about the challenges that lie ahead.

Spend time thinking and talking about how you would answer these questions:

- **What has been good or valuable about lockdown that we would like to continue and develop in the coming months?**
- **What has caused us to think, ‘I wonder if we could try this...?’**
- **What have we learned about ourselves, about our congregation, and about the world that must shape what we do now?**

## 2 – Preparing to step out from lockdown

### *Who makes the decision to re-open?*



As the lockdown phase eases to an end, we know that for some time yet social distancing (or ‘physical distancing’ – we need our social contact) will remain in place, even if the details also ease. We understand better the hygiene measures that are required to make our buildings and our people as safe as we can be. Before you resume activities, you must have completed a written Risk Assessment and put in place appropriate measures to reduce risks. A template has been provided to help Elders’ Meetings with this, but you must work carefully through the template to identify which risks are applicable in your particular context, and whether your situation means there are other risks to be assessed and addressed. Elders should minute their acceptance of the completed Risk Assessment which shows the risks they have assessed and the steps they have taken to mitigate and minimise those risks, and if their Synod Office asks for a copy of the completed document to be sent to them, they must comply with that request. Pay careful attention to advice and instruction from Government, the denomination, and insurance companies. Do not act against their advice/regulation as this puts the Elders’ Meeting (or equivalent) in significant jeopardy over liability. **Nothing in this paper can be taken to supersede official advice and policy, although in assessing locally applicable risks, the Elders may choose to operate to a higher standard than regulations require.**

If your church is in a Local Ecumenical Partnership, the ultimate decision on when to re-open ought to lie with the denomination who are the Trustees of the building, but we would expect the views of each partner to be honoured as far as possible – it would be unhelpful to move faster than each partner denomination is ready to move. Nevertheless, it will be for each Elders’ Meeting (rather than denominational officers) to decide when the local church may open their buildings, subject to complying with government requirements. Where churches are in a group or share ministry with others, it is likely that different congregations will be ready to open at different times. There can be no suggestion that, “because another church served by our minister is re-opening, then so must (or may) we,” or “She has started doing services for them so she can start them for us too.” The risks and mitigations associated with each local church must be assessed separately.

For some of our number, any decision to delay re-opening will cause additional distress and may have an adverse effect on their mental health. This will make them more vulnerable in safeguarding terms, and Elders and others need to understand how to support people in this position. It will help to consult as widely as possible with your church community about a timetable for re-opening safely so that you can understand the felt needs of everyone and make an informed choice. Be careful, though, not simply to listen to the loudest voices, whether they are urging restraint or pushing for the earliest possible re-opening. Weigh the full range of opinion as you evaluate risk and support. Pay particular attention to the pastoral care of those who might be fearful or unable to resume face-to-face gatherings, or who feel they are getting “left behind” if the church starts to meet again without them.

### *Who should come to our church buildings?*



Since “New Normal” was published, greater clarity has emerged about those who should be “shielded,” and those who needed to be especially careful because they are at increased risk from Coronavirus. Shielding

requirements will be eased for everyone in the coming weeks, but increases in the infection rate (the “R-number” that has been widely reported) might mean that the “Extremely Clinically Vulnerable” and the “Clinically Vulnerable” groups need additional protection to be reinstated.

Be sure that you understand the difference between the two groups. The “Extremely Clinically vulnerable” are those with more serious health conditions, and should have had letters telling them that their medical conditions meant that they should be shielded by others. The “Clinically Vulnerable” are those aged over 70 (who may be fit and well) and those with a number of chronic health conditions which mean that they would typically be encouraged to get an annual ‘flu jab. The NHS and government web sites spell this out in greater detail, and this should be your source for the most up-to-date advice about who can do what, with whom and under what circumstances and restrictions. Both groups need to continue to exercise caution about how they interact with others. They must take responsibility for doing all that they can do reasonably to keep themselves safe from Covid-19, but as church families we also bear a responsibility to do our part in keeping them safe. How will your church ensure that any shielding or other protective measures in place can be respected, so that your more clinically vulnerable people are not unnecessarily exposed to the risk of infection?

How and when will you give notice to your wider community as well as your regular fellowship that things are starting up at your church premises/usual meeting place? Are there those for whom current advice means they should not be mixing in large groups? Do **not** encourage those to whom this applies to return to church services and activities during this phase. The risk to those in your congregation might well mean that you should not resume public worship for many months. This may also be true if your regular worship leaders are at increased risk from catching the virus. Some local churches are opting not to resume until everyone can safely resume – might this apply to you? Could delaying the resumption by even another month mean that the risk of infection is measurably lower for everyone?

What additional/alternative worship provision can you make for those unable to return to public worship immediately? What about those with whom your church has had contact during lockdown whose illness, disability, or other vulnerability means that they simply cannot get to a physically-gathered church service or event? What about those who have been exploring questions of faith, or who have been hurt by previous involvement in church and don’t yet feel comfortable to join a physical gathering at church? Can you safely produce and distribute service/notice sheets, sermon transcripts, or worship recordings to those still at home? (Some research has shown that Covid-19 can remain active on metal and plastic surfaces for up to three days and on paper/cardboard for 24 hours.) Can you continue or start to provide live-streamed worship from the church premises, and can your stay-at-home members access it if you do?

### *To open for worship, or not to open?*

This question might actually be framed as, 'To what are we considering inviting people to return?'

Some churches may be keen to return to their former patterns of worship, although regulations will prevent communal singing in most places initially. We have heard of other churches who are looking at a phased path to resuming worship, which may include some variety:

- Worship of a traditional style (albeit without hymns being sung) – depending on the capacity of the worship space, this may require for a period the same service to be run twice (or more) to accommodate worshippers safely, but be aware of the importance of cleaning between successive groups in order to minimise the risk of virus transmission;
- Worship of a shorter duration – as the risk of infection increases with the length of contact between people, consider whether you should offer shorter services;
- For those churches which offered worship online, you may wish to factor in continuity of digital services, being particularly mindful of those who cannot safely re-join physically-gathered services and those who chose to access digital offerings but may not be ready to join a physical congregation;
- For those with children and young people and who may struggle to provide a separate children's or youth programme, offer an all-age service as their new standard format.

One church is exploring the likelihood that the pre-recorded and streamed service will remain the main act of worship, and those that wish to and are able to, will be able to gather in the church building when they re-open and share in that online service as a group.

Another church has been able to provide low-cost computer tablets to a number of people who do not have computers and broadband connection at home so that they can access live-stream worship – is this something that might help your fellowship?

It may be that the best thing that your fellowship can do is NOT to resume gathered worship yet, but to stay in touch with each other by telephone and letter, and remind members where broadcast services are available. Can you encourage all members of the fellowship to all tune into a particular service at the same time, remembering in prayer the others that they might normally worship alongside?

Take time and care to consider the worship pattern that may help all those who are part of your existing community, and those who have joined through these lockdown days, to worship God and know spiritual nurture. In developing any new worship pattern, make sure that it doesn't become a burden for a minister or a few worship leaders, but is reasonable and sustainable for some period.

Be aware that some of our Ministers, Elders and other office-holders will feel some pressure to resume their duties before medical advice permits or recommends, or before they feel safe to do this. Shield them from that pressure as well as coronavirus. Do not allow that pressure to be exerted upon anyone, even if it means that there won't be an organist or preacher available on particular Sundays. To do otherwise is abusive. You will need to alter plans to allow for key people not being available for an extended period. Different people have experienced the pandemic in different ways and some will have been made more vulnerable than others because of stress and circumstance. The URC have

published a very helpful leaflet, “**Covid-19 and Safeguarding**” to help you understand the safeguarding implications for those whose vulnerability has been increased by the pandemic and who are now adults or children at risk.

### *Planning the use of space*



We have become used to the distancing measures requiring us to remain at least 2m apart from others not in our own household. These requirements are starting to change, although the recommendation remains that people should keep a physical distance from others to reduce the risk of virus transmission. If the 2m rule still applies, what is the new capacity of your worship area? If and when that requirement is reduced, will you provide a safer space by retaining the rule? Just because it may be permissible to reduce distancing to 1m, does not mean it is wise. If people are going to be relatively close to each other for sustained period of time, then retaining a greater distance is likely to be safer. It is perfectly acceptable for a church, as they make their assessment of risk, to decide to act more cautiously than government minimum requirements. How will you communicate and enforce the capacity limits and distancing requirements? How will you respond when visitors/potential new worshippers arrive without notice that takes you over your calculated capacity – are there people who are briefed on how to respond? Should you make distancing marks on floors and forecourts for those arriving, and avoid congestion in entrance foyers? How will you close off pews/remove chairs to keep distancing in place? If you have chairs that are moveable, where will you safely stack/store excess chairs so that they don't create a hazard? Do narrow aisle and doorways mean you should implement a one-way system through the building? Prepare clear signage for your building that will be easy for everyone to read and understand quickly.

### *Dealing with the trauma*



Many churches will have had members die during the lockdown phase – from Coronavirus or from other causes. Many members will have had family members or close friends die in this period. Some will have had funerals take place that were far from normal, or will have been prevented from attending the funeral. Others will still be waiting for arrangements to be made. How will you corporately acknowledge and remember the dead, lamenting their loss? How will you acknowledge that the Body has been damaged by these deaths and, where appropriate, help others to pick up responsibilities and positions left open by these deaths? Will it be appropriate to have a joint memorial service for loved ones, or to hold a series of these services for each bereaved family? When will you be able to do this safely? Be aware that some will have become vulnerable during the weeks of lockdown, for reason of poorer mental health, finance, strained relationships or abuse. Some will be deeply disturbed by the unfamiliar arrangements in much loved churches. Some will be anxious about the future of their fellowship, or feel guilt over the church closing “on their watch.” Some will have been deeply disturbed by the lack of physical and emotional contact through the months of lockdown. Some others will be worried by the prospect of a possible second wave and having to go through all of this again. Ensure that key people are alert to the signs of distress, abuse and neglect and know how to respond appropriately to any safeguarding issues that are presented. Be cautious about expressing thanksgiving that we can return to our buildings, when some will be acutely aware of loss and want to mourn those who cannot be there.

Be aware that relationships will have been altered and broken, whether by bereavement, enduring separation, or even disagreement on the way to proceed.

Give attention to this and seek healing for all who are hurting, and reconciliation wherever that is possible. Be conscious that different people will need different approaches and take different amounts of time to begin to move on from the trauma they have experienced.

The Revd Carla A. Grosch-Miller and her colleagues in the Tragedy and Christian Congregations project have researched and written about congregational trauma. Their web site at <https://tragedyandcongregations.org.uk/> offers a wealth of theological and practical resource and is well worth accessing.

### 3 - Preparing the buildings for resumption



This section is primarily for individuals concerned with managing church buildings, but the whole Elders' Meeting will need to be aware of the contents and help with planning appropriate action.

#### *Physical security check*

Take a walk around the building and make sure that it all still looks secure. If there is evidence of a break-in, exercise caution and consider whether the police should be called. In any case, notify your insurance company and Trust Officer.

#### *Risk assessment*

Once you are happy to go back into the buildings, walk through each room in turn looking for any hazards. This should be a part of your regular monitoring of the building anyway, but this is an ideal time to take stock. Record anything of concern and what steps you take to mitigate or remove the risk. Is everything in good order? Is there unnecessary clutter which might prove an obstacle during emergency evacuation or present a fire hazard? Do the electrics look to be in good order (no broken plug sockets/switches, etc.)? Are the doors and windows sound? Is there evidence of a failing roof/water ingress? Is any emergency lighting working properly? What do you need to do next to resolve any issues found? A detailed **Risk Assessment template** and worked example of how you might complete the template are available on the Coronavirus Advice page of the URC web site. Resources such as floor tape, banners, and badges to remind people about distancing are available at [www.urcshop.co.uk/coronavirus](http://www.urcshop.co.uk/coronavirus) and some free posters, "please do not sit here" seat cards, etc. are available to download at <https://urc.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>.

#### *Legionella*

If your water supply has not been drained down during the lockdown, you will need to make sure that every tap is run for a minimum of 20 minutes. Instant hot water systems need to be set to 60°C to kill off the legionella bacterium. Fuller advice is available from your Synod office.

#### *Cleaning routines*

If nobody has been accessing your building for some weeks then the virus will not have survived on any hard surfaces. Even if it has only been visited for security or a single person livestreaming worship, clean every surface that might have been touched within the last week. Remember pews/chairs, tables, microphones, pulpit/lectern, door handles, etc. This is also an ideal time to clean children's toys, books, and shelves that they can reach – regardless of any worries about coronavirus we have a responsibility to maintain a safe and healthy environment. Don't assume your usual anti-bacterial cleaners will be effective unless they have also been tested on viruses to an appropriate British Standard. Soap and water are still the best defence against the fatty layer around the virus. Where applicable refer to specialist advice on cleaning historic surfaces in listed buildings. Cleaning as you go/immediately after use is far more effective than a weekly (or less often) deep clean.

## 4 – Using our buildings safely

### Worship in the premises

Each of the governments and devolved administrations are moving to the point where places of worship can resume public worship. Distancing measures are expected to be required for many months beyond the end of the lockdown period, and you must ensure that you comply with the regulation and guidance in place from time-to-time. Do you need to think about moving chairs further apart so that only household groups sit together, or closing off some pews to enforce distancing? Don't stack surplus chairs in an unsafe manner, or in places that will cause evacuation obstacles. Be ready for the "that's my seat" protests, but don't accept them! We have a responsibility to our members and wider society to continue to do our part in minimising virus spread, and that will mean ongoing inconvenience for us all.

### Planning for public worship



Consider who will be available to take part and lead worship, and who will be available to form the congregation. Is resuming physically-gathered public worship safe and viable yet? Do not be afraid to say, "this is not yet the right time to resume." Leadership means taking the right decisions, even when they are difficult. **If** it is safe and practical to resume public worship in the church building ensure that practical arrangements for social distancing are in place. Is your risk assessment in a form that can be shared with visiting worship leaders so that they can make a judgement about whether it is safe for them to lead your worship? Consider your order of service – both the content and duration of the service. There is some scientific evidence that the deeper breathing associated with singing can project water droplets, and thus coronavirus, far beyond the 2m required for social distancing. It is possible therefore that communal hymn singing will still be restricted long after churches may resume their meetings for worship. Do not act against official guidance and restrictions. Have you got the means to play music as an aid to reflection (rather than singing)? Will you offer purely a service of Word and prayer? Will it be "Quaker-style," meeting largely in silence? For some, not being able to sing hymns will be as or even more unsettling as not meeting at all for worship – be aware of this dynamic, and also the change in "feel" that sitting so far apart will create. Would your church, in fact, be better continuing to use alternative means of worshipping for a longer period – distributed printed material, online worship or the services broadcast on television and radio?

### Gathering for worship



For the foreseeable future, assume that a friendly handshake (and much less a hug and/or kiss!) is NOT appropriate as you welcome people to worship and other activities. Make sure your welcomers/stewards know this and follow good practice. How will you handle the tendency for people to gather in foyers/at the back of church for a chat with friends they haven't seen for a while – will this break distancing guidelines and cause congestion that makes it difficult for more people to enter the building? What do you need to do with signage and explanation to ensure people will move quickly to seats and maintain appropriate distancing throughout their time in the building?

What provision will you make for either liquid soap and running water (with paper towels) or hand sanitiser with at least 60% alcohol, and how will you ensure that everyone arriving for worship cleans their hands? In England the "1 metre plus" rule is being introduced, whereby people are still advised to maintain a distance of 2m where possible, but where that is not possible people may reduce distancing

to no less than 1m if appropriate mitigation is in place. That mitigation may include wearing face coverings – check for local and current guidance. If that guidance allows reduced distances, what are the appropriate mitigation measures for your context – should greeters all wear face coverings and should you require worshippers to do the same? Who is responsible for providing coverings – should you have a stock of disposable face masks for those who don't arrive with something suitable? How will you communicate the need and provision? The UK Government advice remains that 2m distancing is still greatly preferred, even when regulations are relaxed. Different jurisdictions may provide different requirements.

Familiarise yourselves with current advice on recording names and contact details for those entering the building to allow contacts to be tracked and traced. Different jurisdictions are putting forwards different expectations. If personal contacts details are collected, understand that religious affiliation is special category data. You must have a lawful basis for collecting that information. You must not retain this data longer than is necessary, and 3-4 weeks is likely to be sufficient, and it must be held securely throughout that period and only disclosed to the relevant authorities. It must be destroyed at the end of the retention period.

#### *At the end of worship*

What will be your new routine for the end of worship? The preacher should not, for the foreseeable future, shake hands at the door with those leaving, yet surely some important pastoral contact takes place then. The preacher might consider wearing a face covering, but that does not protect them if anyone else comes too close who has the virus. How will you handle tea and coffee after worship? Should it be resumed immediately? Think about physical distancing and the hygiene of cups, spoons, biscuits, etc. Handing someone a cup risks transferring viruses (remember you can be infected or carry coronavirus without necessarily showing symptoms). Similarly, collecting cups after use and washing them – can you issue gloves (disposable or “marigolds”) for washing up? Don't put biscuits on a plate for a succession of fingers to touch, and definitely don't put them back into a tin for next week! Think about how you will wipe down tables and serving surfaces after use.

#### *Singing in worship*

At the time of publication, regulation in England means that corporate singing in worship is not yet allowed. Regulation for other jurisdictions will vary. Although there is a mix of evidence and scientific opinion, the balance comes down on the side of corporate singing putting people at increased risk, so even when regulations are relaxed, churches are asked to exercise caution and pay close attention to updated guidance. Whilst congregational singing is not allowed, there is the possibility of a soloist singing, although the singer should be well away from the congregation and ideally behind a plastic screen and/or facing away from the congregation to minimise the spread of aerosolised virus particles. Detailed regulation concerning soloists was not available at the time of writing, so check the current position within your jurisdiction.

#### *Face coverings in church*

The purpose of face coverings is primarily to reduce the risk of the wearer passing on infection, rather than to protect the wearer, although there is some degree of protection afforded to the wearer as well. There is a danger that people will wear a face covering and forget other good practice – maintaining hand hygiene, touching their face, ignoring distancing guidance, etc. Face coverings can also be a significant barrier to anyone who relies on lip reading or seeing facial

expression, and can make understanding very difficult for those with hearing loss and those with dementia. Where worn, face coverings should be replaced or thoroughly washed regularly.

### *Sacraments*



**For Communion**, think about how the elements will be distributed to prevent cross-contamination, and how the elements will be served maintaining a suitable distance between the person serving and the person receiving. Will you be able to safely resume Communion services, and if not, how will you help people to deal with that emotionally and spiritually? Assume that the Common Cup is not appropriate; neither is passing a plate and tray of glasses from hand to hand with everyone serving themselves or their neighbour. Ensure that the President and serving Elders wash/sanitise their hands before distribution. Ensure that the vessels and cloths are properly cleaned with soap and water after use. For churches that practice communicants coming forwards to receive the elements, how will you remind them to practice social distancing as they are waiting in line and as they are served?



**For Baptism** (infant or believers), the risk of virus spreading is currently too high for the same water to be used for successive candidates. Think about how you will keep the baptismal candidate and those not in their immediate household at an appropriate distance from you and from each other. This may well mean delaying baptism, and, particularly for infants, offering an alternative rite such as a thanksgiving or dedication service with the possibility of baptism to follow at a later date if desired.

### *Taking the offering*



Because of the risk of virus transmission, passing the plate along rows cannot be your practice for the foreseeable future. Encourage bank standing orders/transfers. Consider a basket at the back of church for people to leave their gifts as they enter (but be mindful of security.) Consider investing in a contactless machine for giving by card. Anyone handling cash should wear gloves for counting and banking. Remember to include those gifts offered through bank transfers in the prayer of dedication. See the guidance leaflet “**Online and Contactless Giving at Local Churches**” from URC Communications for greater detail.

### *Junior Church vs All-age/Intergenerational*



For churches blessed with children amongst their number, don't assume that your leaders/workers will be ready to resume their previous activities. How will you protect both child and adult from transmitting the virus? Is the room large enough to allow appropriate distancing? Are the children of an age where they won't need to be in close contact with leaders? Would it be better to offer good quality all-age/intergenerational worship instead of “sending children out”? Are your current worship leaders equipped to lead all-age worship (which is NOT the same as children's worship)? What additional training, support and resources are needed to offer quality worship that is genuinely accessible and meaningful to all? Do other people need to join or replace those who would normally lead your worship? Be aware that younger children particularly are less likely to understand things such as hand hygiene, the important of not sharing food and drink, or maintaining appropriate physical distancing. Parents/carers must take responsibility for supervision of their children.

### *Worshipping and undertaking other activities outdoors*

The current position in England, Scotland and Wales is that the number of people allowed to gather outside is significantly restricted and so only the smallest of congregations could lawfully gather outside. When that position is altered by further relaxation of regulations, churches are still strongly advised to maintain appropriate distancing, hand hygiene and cough/sneeze etiquette. Hymnbooks and Bibles should not be shared, although single-use service sheets may be produced, or projection could be used if electrical safety can be maintained. The same regulations on singing will apply as to worship conducted inside a building. Be aware additionally that anyone leading/contributing to worship who needs to raise their voice to project their voice so as to be heard by everyone will be exposing everyone to the same risks as with singing – public address/sound reinforcement equipment must be used if the congregation will not be able to hear at a normal speaking level. Be mindful that children and young people are generally very positive about outdoor activities – outdoor prayer stations and prayer labyrinths could be used to good effect, as well as outdoor games, nature art projects, etc.

### **Resuming other church activities**

#### *Church activities in the church building*

 Follow all of the same advice as for public worship regarding greeting, social activities, cleaning, etc. Consider if the rooms you normally use for midweek meetings (prayer, Bible study, fellowship groups, children's' activities, cafes, lunch clubs, etc.) are of sufficient size to accommodate group sizes – might you need to move to a different room, limit numbers, or split into more than one group? How will you communicate this? Do you need to safely recruit new group leaders (remembering your safeguarding policy)? How soon can you restart groups that include people vulnerable by age and health condition? If you are increasing the number of groups, do you need additional support with cleaning, caretaking/furniture arrangement?

### **Resuming lettings**

#### *Re-opening to other congregations hosted in the building*

 How will you agree with hosted congregations their responsibilities to maintain appropriate good practice on distancing, cleaning routines, etc.? Will times of their services need to be altered to allow for cleaning between worship services/other lettings? Whilst we will want to offer good hospitality, this is an opportunity to address any areas of tension that existed with the hosted congregation.

#### *Resuming external lettings*

 Many of the same questions as above apply – is the room adequate, can you safely accommodate the numbers required, are there any additional cleaning and caretaking requirements? Will it be the church or the external organisation who is responsible for cleaning facilities they use (rooms and toilets) before and after sessions – that needs to be agreed in writing with the organisation. Ask for their written Risk Assessment to show they understand how to manage coronavirus-related risks. Ensure there is clear agreement about how hand hygiene and distancing is to be managed on arriving at the building and during the period of their use. Church buildings are primarily for the work of building the Kingdom of God, for delivering Christian mission. External lettings are allowable when the Church does not need the use of the space for church-related activities. Resumption from lockdown provides an excellent opportunity for Elders' meetings (and LEP equivalents) to re-evaluate priorities. If available

space is at a premium, are there some groups that fit the mission priorities of the church more closely, and if so, should they be given precedence if rooms or times need to be adjusted? Is there an up-to-date written letting agreement in place? What re-structuring of your budget is necessary to accommodate any reduced income from lettings? Or do you need to increase your letting fees to help to balance any lost bookings? If user groups have exclusive use of space in the premises (which includes exclusive use of any storage space) they should be occupying under a licence, which needs the involvement of the building trustees and legal advice (usually this is administered by the Synod Trust company.) Similarly, any variation of licence terms (space that may be used, rental terms, etc.) should be agreed through the building trustees, not the Elders' Meeting.

### Church meetings



The Basis of Union requires the Church Meeting to meet “at least once per quarter” (Basis 2.(1)). However, the charity regulators (Charity Commission in England and Wales, OSCR in Scotland and equivalents in the island jurisdictions), and the URC, accept that during the pandemic members' meetings like this cannot take place. Follow guidance in place from time-to-time in deciding when to fix meeting dates. Mission Council will take place instead of General Assembly this year and will be considering alternate Standing Orders to allow the councils of the church to meet online (including the use of telephone conferencing if video conferencing is not available or practical.) Consider how you will manage social distancing during a face-to-face meeting. Consider which of your members is at increased risk from the virus and whether it is safe for them to attend meetings, and use that to inform your decision as to whether or not it is safe to resume. Meeting online may empower some to “attend” the meeting but disenfranchise others – how will you weigh between those groups? Whilst face-to-face Church Meetings are unable to take place, postpone non-urgent and controversial business, and make use of Elders' meetings to deal with urgent business, making a careful minute of why the Elders are considering matters that would normally be referred to Church Meeting.

### Finances



Remember the Plan for Partnership requires that payment into the Ministry & Mission Fund is, “the first charge on local church's income” – it has a higher priority than any other expense a church will incur. (In the case of LEPs, we expect that your contribution to other denominational costs would be treated equally with M&M contributions – that is, equally, but without one denomination or another taking a higher priority: that is what it means to be in partnership.) Some of your members will be in considerably reduced financial circumstances and may not be able to resume giving at their previous level. Communicate the financial need to all members without putting any pressure on anyone, or making anyone feel guilty. Look at your budget – are there areas of expenditure that can be reduced or delayed without causing bigger problems further down the line? Speak to Synod officers for advice – don't get into the position where choices are taken away because advice is not sought soon enough.

## 5 – To discuss: what is the “New Normal” for your Church?

### Do you still need a church building?



We have missed being able to meet together for worship, fellowship and service. Undoubtedly, a number of our members will have missed meeting together in the church building. But we have survived outside the building, albeit because we had to and at the expense of suspending a number of activities. Yet before we fall back into routine and habit, take some time to explore whether you still need a church building – or at least a building of the size or in the location that you currently have one. Would there be a freedom from letting go of the current buildings and meeting in community space (or even, for smaller churches, in somebody’s home)? Would being freed of the expense and complication of managing a building give new energy to engage in mission in the community? Would it just make the church a happier place? Would it mean that you could re-locate to somewhere that would make it easier to reach the people you want to reach? Is this the moment to ask the questions that seemed impossible before lockdown? This is a big decision that must not be rushed, but it might just be the right time to start a conversation on the subject amongst the Elders before bringing the Church Meeting into the conversation.

### What might worship look like?



Worship services will not look “normal” from the first Sunday after the lockdown phase ends. Prepare for the fact that a significant number of your congregation will still be vulnerable to serious illness if they become infected, and so may not be willing to, or should not, resume physical attendance. A number of people that would normally be present and taking an active role may not be there. In response we can encourage, or press, others to take on those “jobs,” or we can seek to be more creative.

Most significantly for our Reformed expectations of worship, corporate singing will not be permitted in most jurisdictions. How will that affect the “diet” of worship that will be offered? What will you do in place of singing? Will it simply feel wrong to gather for worship without singing, and so you decide to delay the resumption of physically-gathered worship?

We know that even before coronavirus, numbers attending worship were steadily falling in almost all of our churches. We don’t assume that there was anything that you were doing that was putting people off, but might the opposite be true: if you do things differently, you might start to attract others who were not previously attending worship? Anecdotally, a number of Ministers have reported many people joining online worship services that would not or could not attend physically in the past. Might streaming our worship online be part of the “new normal”? URC Communications has published a series of guides on using Zoom, social media, livestreaming and licensing which will benefit those who read them.

We might need to identify which things we should give up permanently – or at least for another season – in order to create space, time and energy to do new things, or to do some of our old things differently. There is a suggestion that the style of online worship during lockdown, which is much more about the minister and others talking to camera, is a very different experience to simply streaming our “standard” services with viewers/participants at a distance from the “action”. Might we then need to evolve two styles of service – one that might be recorded and then streamed (or distributed by other means such as DVDs or USB memory sticks), as well as the more recognisable worship offering? Many churches, pre-pandemic, had stopped their evening service – might an online or recorded service come to take its place? Or should it be vice versa – if you are getting a larger congregation online, should your morning act of worship be that, and then physically gather in the afternoon or evening? Remember too that there is nothing that says our main act of worship must be on a Sunday (though many good reasons why this should also be retained as a day for worship.) Why not think about gathering in person for teaching, prayer and fellowship on Sunday mornings, but have afternoon or evening services streamed which include singing?

Be aware that Ministers and worship leaders will be expecting a significant number of memorial and thanksgiving services post-pandemic, as the restrictions placed on funerals meant that many were unable to grieve well or fully. They will need a good deal of time for an extended period to prepare well and lead them. Do not immediately re-fill diaries with the “same old” – keep plenty of time available for this vital aspect of ministry.

Many churches have climbed a steep learning curve on using technology in worship, both from the “provider’s” point of view and that of the participant. It would seem a shame to lose that newly gained ground. So how will your church continue in this rich vein? If we are now able to record (video or audio-only) our services, how will we share them? Some are using established hosting platforms (Church Online, YouTube, Facebook); some have provided some degree of interaction in online worship, for example through Zoom; some are putting recordings on their own web site or sharing them as podcasts. Others are sharing audio-recordings on USB memory sticks (which seems to be the normal distribution method for Talking Newspapers now). Others still are emailing transcripts of devotional material, or hand-delivering or posting printed matter to those who cannot access more technical routes. As they put in the extra effort to do this, more people are being included in our corporate devotional life – for example, those who were “shut-ins” but still part of our established fellowships, and those who are being reached for the first time. We are two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and surely it is time for our devotional life to start to catch up, without losing the richness of our heritage?

## Community Engagement



How did the restrictions affect your engagement with the community around us? What was the story for your buildings and was there a different story for the engagement of members with neighbours and those in need? What have you learned about the way you connect with people who didn’t come to your building or activities before the pandemic? What have you learned about the needs of those around your buildings or where you live? What can you do differently to express more fully God’s love in word and action? URC Communications have published the booklet “**New reality, same mission**” to help churches work through connecting with their communities in a new way.

## Pastoral Care



One of the beneficial aspects of the lockdown was that intentional pastoral care increased almost everywhere. People were regularly in touch with others to ask how they were, whether or not they were doing so “officially” as Elders holding a pastoral care list. The situation we found ourselves thrust into meant that Ministers and others found they had time as well as the incentive to prioritise pastoral care. This begs two vital questions: firstly, how can we stop filling our diaries with the same old things to leave space for high quality continuing pastoral care? Secondly, how can we maintain momentum so that pastoral care properly belongs to the whole Body of Christ, not only to those who occupy certain offices?

There is no suggestion that we were doing the wrong things pre-pandemic, and certainly not that anyone was either under-working or shirking responsibility. Rather, as we start to plan for our “new normal”, the challenge is to identify things that we have recently stopped doing so that we can engage in pastoral care at (or even above) the lockdown levels. This might be done through simply not re-starting some of the tasks that took so much time previously, or it might be through finding others to share the burden of those activities that are resuming, and also to share in the ministry of pastoral care.

If (as in many places) pastoral care previously, “didn’t count unless it was the Minister,” is there now a greater openness to receiving care from a variety of others? How will you communicate to the church that pastoral care matters but that it is a whole-Body responsibility? Should this be for the Minister’s pastoral letter in a monthly magazine, through a more personal letter, through teaching and preaching in church, or (almost certainly) a mixture of this and other means? What matters now is how to re-shape our churches, to re-set expectations, and to live in the way that we intend to live, all in a sustainable manner. What we don’t need (with very few exceptions) is Ministers working harder: most do too much and more than they ought. We need Emerging into the “New Normal”

a balance in our ministries that will last beyond a few weeks or months of post-pandemic recovery.

## Meetings



Another positive outcome of the lockdown was the improvements in our environment as traffic reduced dramatically. With hindsight, will we see this just as a blip – an interruption to business as normal that we are longing to get past? Or might we find ways to tread more lightly on God's earth? Zoom and other video-conferencing platforms surely cannot replace face-to-face meetings forever. The non-verbal clues are often missing and the free-flow exchange of ideas is more difficult in online encounters. As so many have learned how to meet online, though, we should be looking for opportunities to avoid the greenhouse gas emissions and congestion of physical travel, as well as the costliness in time. In terms of good governance, if we want to use video conferencing in the councils of our church then we must ensure that all participants can see and hear each other. The challenge of holding a Church Meeting by Zoom, for example, is therefore immediately obvious. But it may be possible to use technology to facilitate Elders' meetings in some places, or committee and task groups. If a number of people are able to physically gather and some participants join the meeting, we can still make a measurable difference to our collective carbon footprint.

Alongside returning to physical meetings, there will be some conversations that can properly and helpfully take place through other means – phone calls and email, for instance, rather than returning to crowded agenda for our meetings. We need to be clear about how we will take decisions well and about agreeing schemes of delegated authority – and record what we agree – but much business that doesn't require decision-making can easily move to a different forum for discussion, reporting progress back to the councils of the church as necessary.

## Managing external users



Many churches rely heavily on lettings income to balance their budget (or at least reduce their annual deficit!) Buildings held under the United Reformed Church Acts may use spare capacity in their buildings to let to outside organisations and individuals. However, we must remember that however community-focussed your church is, we do not keep church buildings simply to provide space for external organisations, even if we have come to rely on lettings income. Our buildings are places for the Church to gather for worship and discipleship and as tools for mission. It is NOT Christian mission to let space to a slimming club or animal charity jumble sale with no interaction other than collecting the "rent"; it MAY be mission if there is some value added by the church through Christian hospitality (thus showing love in action other than through being "landlord"), through befriending group leaders and members, or genuinely being in partnership with the letting organisation in serving the neighbourhood. Where does the balance lie for your church? Does this re-set/resumption moment provide an opportunity to do things differently and intentionally make your lettings about mission? We know that many user groups have been invited to church events and ignored or declined the invitation in the past. We cannot assume that the old order applies any longer. We can find ways to do things differently. It obviously takes a regular commitment for a church member to open doors to let tenants in, but it does provide better security rather than issuing keys to outside bodies, as well as giving opportunities to strengthen relationships, develop communication and build community. If that isn't the right way forwards for your church, is there something you can do to improve the welcome that user groups experience, rather than cold rooms and a set of colder notices about stacking chairs, turning lights off and leaving the room clean? How will you support and value the groups coming into your building, rather than simply collecting money from them? You might even have church members that would like to join the user groups for exercise, education or friendship – when was the last time that was discussed in your church meeting or notice sheet?

Recognising the financial dependence on letting income, are there user groups that have been problematic and for whom this provides an opportunity to end or re-negotiate their use? Have you got an up-to-date written agreement, with clear terms and conditions of use for every user

group? Do not simply re-admit all previous users into the building without checking with the Synod Office for an appropriate standardised form of agreement that give the local church and the trustees of the building an appropriate level of protection. Are there issues of physical security and safeguarding that need to be reviewed and updated? Do the user groups carry their own public liability as they should? Do they operate their own health and safety and safeguarding policies, or are they aware of, and compliant with, the church's policies? Our new normal must be built around doing things well. That does not mean that we submerge ourselves in an avalanche of bureaucracy. It does mean that we do **all** things to the glory of God, and that means cutting corners must not be part of our new way of working.

### **Web sites and Social Media**

Whatever changes we are making in our routines and practices, we will do well to communicate them. Having a well-maintained web site and/or active social media presence ought to be a significant priority for every church at this stage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If you are offering online worship and devotional material, be sure to highlight how it can be accessed. Explain what to expect in terms of the hygiene and distancing requirements, and what your form of worship will be like for physically-gathered services. Can you include the opportunity for online giving, or explain how offerings are being received at present on your site? Are you making best use of social media to share updates to your community, and to invite them to join in online or face-to-face worship, outreach programmes and other activities? The **iChurch** platform is commended to all United Reformed Church congregations for their web presence. It offers low maintenance sites as well as more complex ones. Existing web sites can be transferred over to iChurch as it offers a commercial-level hosting and protection supported by URC staff – see [www.interactivechurch.org.uk](http://www.interactivechurch.org.uk) or email [iChurch@urc.org.uk](mailto:iChurch@urc.org.uk) for details. See also the URC Communications guides at <https://urc.org.uk/information-guides.html> for advice and help with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram for your church.

## Conclusion

We would be most unwise to look to get back to “how we always do things.” This is, we pray, a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do things better. Some things, like meeting together, we will be glad to do after the Covid-19 lockdown is lifted, but let us be wise as to when and how and for what purposes we start to meet together again.

There are some things that we should be glad that we don't have to start again, or at least start them again the way that we used to do things – things that, “we've always done this way,” when nobody really remembers or understands why. The particular areas for which this applies will depend on your local context and according to your local means.

**Getting on with this conversation and discernment should be a priority.  
If you rush back to the, “old ways,” you could miss the single opportunity  
to find a new way of doing things.**

For other matters, more careful reflection and careful planning will be needed, but this is the right time to start the conversation, rather than continuing as you were without evaluating previous assumptions.

Your Synod officers will be glad to be involved in these discussions with you, and if it would help to seek external facilitators to help the discussion move forwards.

We can have a new vision of what we want our churches to be like – what they might become rather than what they have been. There are so many things that we have been doing that were and are the right things, and we don't need to throw them away. But nothing should unthinkingly be carried forwards.

**The world has changed. It cannot go back to how it was,  
and in many, many ways, neither should it seek so to do.**

The Synod Moderators, 26 June 2020.

## Making Choices About Returning to Activities in Church Buildings

As a community of Christian disciples, we are concerned about the safety of all those who contribute and take part in our shared life. Some are employed or paid stipends as office holders, many are volunteers, more are participants. We are expected to have particular responsibilities towards those we pay, but others may also value guidance about the choices involved in returning to activities in church buildings.

We are familiar with risks that have been around for a while, but COVID-19 is a new risk and we are still learning about who may be affected most. Already we know that certain groups of people are at greater risk than others. The Government has categorised some people into groups:

- the [clinically extremely vulnerable](#). The guidance for people who fall into this group may be different in [Wales](#) and [Scotland](#) and other jurisdictions, but the serious consequences of catching COVID-19 are the same. We assume they will still be cautious about gathering indoors with people from a number of households.
- the [clinically vulnerable](#), which includes all people over 70 and those with underlying health conditions.

Other groups have also been identified as more evidence about the effects of the virus is gathered. We may not know which individuals will catch COVID-19, but we can use some of the information about the risk of complications to help with the conversations people will have about returning to gatherings. At the time of writing it is not clear whether surviving the virus gives immunity or for how long such immunity might last.

As well as trying to assess the risks of catching the virus and the appropriate action to take, we recognise that our attitude to risk varies: the risk that one person may be willing to take is too much for another. Living with someone who is at higher risk, affects the risks other household members are willing to take. When we are talking about gathering together, we need to be sensitive to these variations. When we are coping with new risks we may also be more sensitised to them in comparison to risks that we have coped with for many years. However, government policy is related to the general risk for the population which goes down as the number of the people with the virus goes down, whilst the potential impact of catching the virus for a vulnerable individual remains the same until there are additional treatments and a vaccine.

When the lockdown restrictions were imposed, ministers were designated as key workers because of the fears of COVID-19 resulting in many more funerals. Some churches have also helped with essential food distribution or other essential services and ministers and volunteers have been involved in this work. The URC so far has echoed Government advice that ministers should work from home where possible. As restrictions change, it is time for ministers, volunteers and participants to consider their risks.

Catching the virus depends on the amount of virus you are exposed and for how long, and the risk of that happening during any activity depends on the circumstances. There is evidence about which groups are at risk of more serious consequences if they do have COVID-19 disease.

The assessment 'tool' below helps you to see how different risk factors may combine to give serious health complications should you catch the COVID-19 virus. It does not include the factors that may make you clinically extremely vulnerable, where you should be following the guidance for those who are 'shielding'. It includes the factors where there is significant statistical evidence but does not include any rarer conditions which you may have, so this only offers a starting point. You may want to discuss the results with your doctor or with those who have expectations about your involvement with church life.

This should be read alongside the URC's "Emerging into the 'New Normal'" which includes guidance about minimising risks in the church context, and other government or local advice

about staying safe. We are not claiming medical expertise in sharing this way of scoring your risk but giving a way to show how serious catching the virus may be for you.

**Circle the score next to each one that applies to you and add up your score.**

Risk Factor		Score
Age	50-59	1
	60-69	2
	70-79	4
	80 and over	6
Sex at birth	Male	1
Ethnicity	Caucasian	0
	Black African Descent	2
	Indian Asian Descent	1
	Filipino Descent	1
	Other (including mixed race) Descent	1
Diabetes & Obesity	Type 1 & 2	1
	Diabetes Type 1 & 2 with presence of microvascular complications or HbA1c $\geq$ 64mmol/mol	2
	Body Mass Index greater than or equal to 35 kg/m <sup>2</sup> online BMI calculator: <a href="https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/bmi-calculator/">https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/bmi-calculator/</a>	1
Cardiovascular disease	Angina, previous heart attack, stroke or cardiac intervention	1
	Heart Failure	2
Pulmonary (lung) disease	Asthma	1
	Non-asthma chronic pulmonary disease	2
	Either of the above requiring oral corticosteroids in the last year	1
Malignant neoplasm (cancer)	Active malignancy	3
	Malignancy in remission	1
Rheumatological conditions	Active treated conditions	2
Immuno-suppressant therapies	Any indication	2
<b>Total Score</b>		

**A score of under 3 indicates a lower risk**, but you should still be following the guidance for staying safe.

**A score of 3-5 suggests a greater risk** and you should consider ways of reducing your risk by taking additional precautions or avoiding some activities

**A score of 6 or more suggests a high risk** and indicates that you should continue to work or participate in church life from your home.

The scoring is based on an [article](#) from the [British Medical Association](#) website: "Risk Stratification tool for Healthcare workers during the CoViD-19 Pandemic" using published data on demographics, co-morbid disease and clinical domain in order to assign biological risk." David Strain, Janusz Jankowski, Angharad Davies, Peter English, Ellis Friedman, Helena McKeown, Su Sethi, Mala Rao. medRxiv 2020.05.05.20091967; doi:<https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.05.05.20091967>

*The current version of this document is available to download from the [URC website](#).*