

Letter from Bishop David concerning church buildings re-opening for private prayer

Dear Co-workers in Christ,

Permission has been given by Government to take decisions about re-opening church buildings for individual private prayer from June 15th. This is a significant undertaking, and I am sure will be approached prayerfully, cautiously and with conscientious reference to Government measures and guidelines. We each continue to play our part in the on-going battle against the spread of Covid-19.

In addition, I expect that permission for funerals in church buildings will be modified to allow them to take place under guidance from Public Health England. Further details will be issued as soon as they are available. Government has still made no decision to allow weddings.

All plans and procedures will as usual be founded in social distancing directives. Church buildings will need to be prepared, with on-going provision for regular cleaning. While there is joy for some in being able to admit people to our spaces once again, I would urge you to work within limitations, and consider deeply the well-being of your fellow workers, yourselves and your communities.

Parishes and congregations have been served compassionately by your committed and imaginative leadership during this season, both through digital worship and countless other creative ways of connection and support that have been highly appreciated across our deaneries.

Meanwhile, acts of Public Worship are still not permissible in our buildings or in real gatherings. As we move forward together into this new way of living with the Covid-19 virus, I invite you to reflect with me on the varied expressions of worship, prayer, bible study and pastoral care that have developed. Many of these have been in small or neighbourhood groups. How could they be integrated into a sustainable, serving Church, now and into our shared future? How can we encourage the interest in Gospel proclamation and demonstration that has been generated in the last 13 weeks?

Now, as a priority, please continue to pray how to respond with our Brothers and Sisters, who in addition to unequal effects of the pandemic, are suffering continued injustice and exclusion from the privileges all of us should be free to enjoy in this country.

With my prayers,



+ David Birmingham

Archdeacons' guidance on churches opening for private prayer

The Government announcement that places of worship may open for individual prayer **from next Monday 15th June**, is welcome news, but will obviously present a challenge in some situations. We hope that the information circulated via last Friday's Update was helpful to your preparations.

Do remember even with this new freedom for individual prayer in our buildings, that services, including led prayers at particular times, or prayers said together in church are still not permitted and cannot take place, and live-streaming is only permitted when the church building is closed.

As Bishop David has pointed out, '*There is no obligation for hasty opening of church buildings.*'

The ministry of local churches during lockdown has been inspirational, and our decisions about re-opening for individual prayer only need to be considered prayerfully with that wider perspective in mind.

This decision is best taken by the PCC as a whole and, of course, this can be done via Zoom or an emailed conversation. PCC members should read the national guidance paper on individual prayer and look at the risk assessment template.

Key questions to talk about will include:

- What was our usual practice before lockdown?
- Is it appropriate to change that practice?
- What arrangements will we need to make for regular cleaning and social distancing to comply with the COVID-19 Government requirements?
- In our context, do we need people present in the building while it is open **?
- If so, how many people are available, who are not clinically vulnerable (which includes those over 70)?
- Given this number, can the church realistically be opened, and if so, for how long?
- What practical steps do we need to take (see guidance papers) and who will be responsible for them?

***There remains a question about whether churches are required to have someone supervising individual prayer, and we are urgently seeking clarification on this.*

While wedding services or baptisms are still not permitted, the House of Bishops has during the course of today agreed funerals may take place in churches with strict adherence to Government guidance on social distancing and numbers attending, **beginning next Monday June 15th**. There will be fuller guidance in the Thursday Update, as it becomes available.

Please do not hesitate to be in touch with your Area Dean or with one of us, if you have specific questions or concerns.

The Venerable Simon Heathfield, Archdeacon of Aston
The Venerable Jenny Tomlinson, Archdeacon of Birmingham

Please click on the following links:

National CofE

- For the [Risk Assessment template](#) click the link and scroll down to the 'Resources' section
- [Advice on Individual Prayer by Members of the Public in Church Buildings](#)
- [Advice for Conducting Funerals](#)

HM Government

- [Places of Worship to Re-open for Individual Prayer](#)
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Updated and further guidance now available - 11 June 2020

The following further guidance notes have been placed on the Church of England website today.

1. [Advice for conducting funerals](#) - this detailed paper gives advice about funerals. When PCCs are determining the number of people that their church can safely accommodate under the current guidance, it may also be helpful
 - i) to note the reference in the guidance to minimising numbers present and ensuring that the minister feels that they can effectively 'manage' the number.
 - ii) to take into account the current number allowed by the local council at crematoria.
2. [Guidance for PCCs and incumbents: opening church buildings for works to the building and interior](#) - this paper draws together and updates advice previously issued across two papers.
3. [Risk assessment for opening church buildings to the public: individual prayer](#) - there is an updated specific risk assessment for those PCCs which decide to open the building for individual prayer (click the link and scroll down to the 'Resources' section).
4. [Advice on individual prayer by members of the public in church buildings](#) - a further paper demonstrates how any temporary alterations needed to facilitate opening for individual prayer can be authorised.

Please do not hesitate to be in touch with your Area Dean or with one of us, if you have specific questions or concerns.

The Venerable Jenny Tomlinson, Archdeacon of Birmingham
The Venerable Simon Heathfield, Archdeacon of Aston