

COVID-19 Advice for Services during Lent, Holy Week, and Easter

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19/01/2020	1	The House of Bishops Recovery Group

The Recovery Group has been set up to support the Church of England as government guidance changes through the COVID-19 pandemic. This document has been prepared with information available by the issue date. It will be kept under review and updated as the situation develops, with each update issued as a new version. The current version will always be available to download from the Church of England website via the [Coronavirus FAQs page](#).

This advice should be read alongside the guidance for Using Church Buildings for Public Worship and Individual Prayer and Advice on the Conduct of Public Worship found [here](#).

1. Can we use ash on Ash Wednesday?

Yes, with some changes to typical practice. If words are customarily said at the imposition¹, these words are spoken to the whole congregation before the imposition begins. The minister imposing the ashes should sanitize hands immediately before the imposition of ashes begins. Standing at arm's length from the recipient and wearing a face mask, the minister sprinkles the ashes on each recipient's head without touching them or speaking any words. If the minister accidentally touches the recipient, they must sanitize hands again. The temptation should be resisted to use a single-use implement to apply ash to the forehead.

If ash is being produced locally, this should be done in a hygienic manner. Consideration should be given that, on this occasion, the ash will be sprinkled and not daubed: the addition of oil may not be necessary.

The imposition of ash in places other than the church or churchyard is not recommended.

Ministers may wish to encourage the imposition of ash within households, especially if public worship is not taking place. Instructions for making ash (whether from palm crosses or something else) can be shared with congregations.

2. Can small groups meet, and can talks be given that are not part of public worship?

Such groups are not currently permitted to meet in public buildings or private homes (including vicarages) unless they are support groups. Gatherings in church must be for 'communal worship'.

3. Can the Stations of the Cross be used?

If the Stations of the Cross are being prayed in person, people should not gather around the stations, touch them, or walk between stations. Physical distancing must be preserved. It may be helpful to take pictures of the stations which can be shared on a screen or in a handout, whether people are gathered online or in church.

¹ See *Common Worship: Times and Seasons*, p. 230.

4. Can devotional performances or recitals of music, poetry or dance be held in person?

Unfortunately, it is not possible for gatherings to happen in church buildings other than for public worship or other authorized uses.

5. Can palm crosses be distributed?

Yes. If palm crosses are being made locally, this should be done in a hygienic manner. Crosses could be enclosed in sandwich bags or envelopes to avoid too much contact when they are collected or distributed. Households could make their own palm crosses from palm leaves, paper, or some other material following instructions from the Internet. Paper or other crosses could be affixed to windows of homes. Following long precedent, other kinds of natural foliage could also be used instead of palm crosses.

6. Can the Passion Narrative be said or sung during worship in person?

Yes, provided that the guidance for singing in places of worship is followed. The number of singers (including any clergy and ministers) should be kept to the absolute minimum, and in any case should not exceed three. If it is customary for more than one person to be part of the Passion Narrative, it could be spoken.

7. May outdoor services / processions / walks of witness be held?

Whilst services may take place in the churchyard or other premises where services are routinely held, they may not take place in any other outdoor location. Gatherings of more than 2 people for any other purpose are not permitted outdoors. Processions inside the church building are not recommended at this time.

8. Can the 'Chrism Mass' / Distribution of Oils / Renewal of Commitment to Ministry happen this year?

Yes, as long as the guidance for public worship is followed if they are happening in person, including the observance of local limits on attendance. Bishops and cathedrals may wish to find alternative means of renewing commitments and distributing oils, in addition to a service or other gathering online. If oils are distributed, they should be hygienically bottled in advance and handled a minimum number of times.

9. Can footwashing and the 'Watch' (for instance on Maundy Thursday) take place?

Footwashing and similar activities should not be carried out at this time, especially during worship in person.

The Watch can take place if this can be done if the [guidance on private prayer](#) is followed.

10. Is the Three Hours' Devotion 'communal worship'?

Yes, but as the Government's guidance suggests, 'ceremonies and services [attended in person] should be concluded in the shortest reasonable time'.

11. Can ministers or others prostrate or kneel?

Yes, if physical distancing and hygiene protocols can be maintained; however, everyone should make every effort not to touch communal surfaces.

12. Can we venerate the Cross?

This practice is not recommended if it involves touching: as the Government's guidance indicates, worshippers 'should be prevented from touching or kissing objects that are handled communally'.

13. Can ministers distribute previously consecrated bread (i.e. on Good Friday)?

Yes. However, consecrated bread which is reserved should not be consumed or distributed for 48 hours (two days) by anyone other than the priest who reserved it.² Consequently, bread which is consecrated and reserved on Maundy Thursday should not be used for this purpose.

14. Can part or all of the Easter Vigil or a Dawn Service (or any other service) take place outside?

Yes, though only in the churchyard or other place where services are routinely held. Worshippers should be particularly careful that physical distancing is maintained at all times, including during movement if the service moves into the church building.

15. Can the new fire be kindled? May candles be used?

Yes, provided that physical distancing can be maintained around the fire. Candles should be distributed with a minimum of person-to-person contact.

16. Can the Easter Candle be marked / carried around?

Yes. A minimum number of people should handle the Easter Candle.

17. Can the Exultet (the Easter Song of Praise) be sung?

Yes, as long as the guidance for [singing](#) in places of worship is observed.

18. May Easter gardens / flowers be arranged?

Yes, although only one person should work on them at a time.

² See the Guidance for the [Administration of Holy Communion](#).