

COVID-19 Outdoor Worship and Churchyards

Issue Date	Version	Issued by
23 rd July 2020	3.2	The House of Bishops Recovery Group
Update from version 2: Government guidance changed on July 17 th to state that outdoor worship in public outdoor spaces as well as churchyards is now possible 1. Q. has been edited to reflect this.		

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](#).

As lock-down gradually eases, more and more church communities may be thinking about how to use their churchyard or other nearby outdoor space for church activities. Government guidance is clear that outdoor activities are safer than indoor ones. Specific Government [guidance](#) on places of worship highlights what is possible with outdoor worship.

There are many excellent resources to help with this, such as a [wild worship field guide](#) produced by the Sanctuary Centre and prayer stations from [Engage Worship](#). Further advice and lots of practical resources and examples can be found on our new Outdoor Worship page [here](#).

1. Q. Can we have worship in a churchyard or other public outdoor space?

A. Yes, but the precautions you need to take depend on how many people attend.

If no more than 30 people gather, social distancing guidelines should be followed. That means people should not interact in groups larger than two households or six people. A risk assessment should be conducted, which includes security, and guidance on physical distancing and other good hygiene practices implemented in relation to the COVID 19 virus. You can assess the capacity limits in the same way as you would for the inside of the building taking into account current rules on physical distancing.

If you are intending holding a gathering of more than 30 people in a churchyard or other public outdoor space, you must first carry out a more thorough risk assessment. Guidance for this level of risk assessment, and a template, are provided by the [HSE](#). You must demonstrate that you have taken all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of coronavirus using any guidance issued by the Government relevant to the gathering, such as: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safer-public-places-urban-centres-and-green-spaces-covid-19> .

If you do not manage the public outdoor space you should liaise with those responsible for the open space in question to ensure that the worship can be staged in a safe way that complies with what is said above.

2. Q. Can we open the church grounds for people to walk through and to sit in?

A. Yes. The government's advice is that people can spend time outdoors, including private gardens and other outdoor spaces, in groups of up to six people from different households, following social distancing guidelines. Public gatherings of more than six people from different households are prohibited in law. There is no limit to the size of a gathering in an outdoor space if the people gathered are all members of the same household.

The proven mental health benefits of being in nature are well known. For many of our urban churches, the church grounds are the only green space around, and offer a sanctuary. Having access to green space has never been more important than it is today for people's wellbeing, particularly for those without a garden.

Churchyards can be places of reflection. They can offer signs of hope and joy as well as sadness and mourning.

In all circumstances, as set out by the Government, it is absolutely crucial that people from different households maintain social distancing; ideally 2 metres, and if this is not possible then 1m plus appropriate measures to reduce risk of infection. The Government [guidance](#) gives helpful suggestions about managing physical distancing in outdoor spaces where there is considered to be an issue due to large numbers of people using them.

3. Q. Are we allowed to cut the grass and other gardening?

A. Yes. Whoever undertakes gardening, whether volunteer or professional, must take responsibility for the equipment that they use and for maintaining appropriate physical distancing. If they are using the church's equipment, then it should be sanitised before and after use.

This could be an opportunity to change your mowing regime by allowing suitable areas to grow long over the next few weeks, letting natural wildflowers grow and encouraging biodiversity. You can get advice on this from [Caring for God's Acre](#).

4. Q. Can people visit to tend graves?

A. Yes. The government has included burial grounds as places that can remain open.

5. Q. People are congregating in the church grounds, what should we do?

A. Please do not put yourself at risk by attempting to move on groups of more than six people who are not from the same household. This is a matter for the police to enforce.

If this is a regular occurrence you may wish to consider signage as an intervention as suggested in [Government guidance](#).

6. Q. We have local community groups that work in our grounds. Do we need to tell them to stop?

A. The professional organisations and charities that provide these services will have their own guidance on how to work during the Covid-19 emergency. You should ask about their compliance if they continue to use your grounds.