

COVID-19 Advice for Clergy Conducting Baptisms

Issue Date	Version	Issued by
25 th September 2020	4.3	The House of Bishops Recovery Group
Updates from version 4.2: on the 14 th September the Government introduced ' the rule of six ' limiting gatherings of people with some exemptions. Following discussions with the Government, section 2 has been updated to include 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 the foundation of Christian life, baptism is a time of joy and celebration for candidates, parents, godparents and the whole church family. While it may be some time before this celebration can be enjoyed as before, there are steps which can be taken to make it as memorable as possible while still adhering to government guidance on physical distancing, public health hygiene and protection of those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

The following advice is intended to assist clergy as they think through the best way of celebrating baptisms. It is not exhaustive but addresses essential issues that should be considered. It should be read in conjunction with the guidance on Opening churches for Public Worship, Advice for Conducting Public Worship and where appropriate advice on the conduct of Holy Communion all of which are available [here](#).

General questions

1. What should I do before the baptism?

- It is important that interaction with the candidate/families must be done as safely as possible. This might mean meeting, at least initially, via video link or talking on the telephone. If face to face meetings are held, please follow the [government guidance](#) on working in other people's homes and ensure that everyone adheres to physical distancing requirements and that numbers are limited, preferably to a minimum. Such meetings should not be held in the house of anyone who is self-isolating or who is in a vulnerable group.
- It is important to be careful to avoid sharing documents, books, photos etc and to remember to wash hands thoroughly before and after the meeting.
- The health implications for those in a vulnerable group should be discussed and if some people in these groups intend to be present at the baptism, their welfare should be kept to the fore.

- These will include advising other attendees that there is a vulnerable person attending, reminding them to take particular care in observing physical distancing, abiding by the law regarding wearing of face coverings, and refraining from attending themselves if they feel unwell.
- If someone from a vulnerable group intends to be present, they should be advised to travel to the church in the safest way possible, preferably in a car by themselves or with someone from their household

2. How many people can attend the baptism?

- If a family wishes to have their baptism as a private ceremony then the attendees must be limited to six people, excluding the officiant and others working at the ceremony.
- If the baptism is to happen within the course of communal worship - a service at which the general public can attend, not just an invited group, and normally referring to an advertised regular act of worship - then the numbers who can attend need to be assessed for the building to determine how many it can hold safely with physical distancing. Guidance on how to do this can be found [here](#).
- During communal worship, there should be no mingling between groups of six and even within those groups, people should continue to physically distance from people they are not living with or are not part of a support bubble with.
- The candidate, their parent(s), godparent(s) and the minister are all that are required to be present for baptism and parents might wish to keep to this number. If they wish to have other family members or friends present, it is important to talk with them about the overall restrictions on numbers.
- You may find that parents/candidates ask to postpone the baptism in light of the restrictions in numbers. This is a decision for them. However, you will want to think about how to follow up these individuals/families so that the baptism can be rearranged when it is appropriate to do so.

3. Should face coverings be worn?

- In England, face coverings are required by law in places of worship, and in other public indoor settings. There are valid exemptions for some individuals and groups to not wear a face covering (see our [guidance on face coverings](#) for details).
- In particular, those who are officiating at services and presiding at Holy Communion, and those who assist them (for instance by reading, preaching, or leading prayers) do not always need to wear a face covering, although one should be worn especially if physical distancing cannot be maintained (i.e. if gathered at the font). This exemption does not apply to worshippers, who should wear face coverings consistent with the requirements for any other public space.
- [Government guidance](#) indicates some health, age, or equality reasons for which people may not be expected to wear face coverings. We encourage clergy and ministers to be sensitive to the needs of those who rely on lip reading, facial expressions, or clear sound.

4. What special steps should I take during the baptism?

- Given the restrictions on numbers attending, clergy might wish to consider ways in which others may be able to join the service, perhaps through an audio or video link. If this is not possible, a recording of the service might be appropriate.
- Please ensure that everyone adheres to the Government guidance on physical distancing. Only clergy and parents should be at the font while godparents should maintain physical distance. Clergy and parents should wear face coverings whilst gathered, especially if social distancing cannot be maintained
- It is important for clergy to be mindful of their own personal hygiene – please wash your hands before and after, face coverings are strongly advised and avoid using communal Bibles etc.
- If the candidate is an infant, he or she should be held by a parent or guardian for the duration of the service, including during the baptism itself.
- The minister should sanitize their hands before and after the Signing with the Cross on the candidate. In some churches candidates are anointed with oil at the Signing with the Cross. This is an optional component of the service. If oil is used, it should be applied with an implement which can be thoroughly cleaned or disposed of.
- Water should be poured over the candidate's forehead using an appropriate implement to pour the water such as a shell. Unfortunately, baptisms by immersion cannot be safely conducted at present. The baptized person, or their parents, may wipe the forehead with paper towels which should be immediately disposed of.
- No one should sign themselves with the baptismal water or be sprinkled with the water after the baptism.
- If a lighted candle is given, the presenting person should sanitize their hands before and after doing so.
- Congregations are not permitted to sing as part of the service. It is now permissible for both professional and non-professional singers and musicians to perform in small groups to people inside and outside of buildings in line with the recommendations for physical distancing and hygiene set out by the Government in their [performing arts guidance](#).

Unless the singers or musicians are employed by the place of worship they should be counted as part of the overall numbers in the service. Recorded music should be considered as an alternative where possible.

5. Can we do full immersion baptisms?

Yes, providing as part of careful planning the following measures are taken:

- Those being immersed should be at least 2 metres away from the congregation and officiants at all times, except while they are being immersed.
- Only one person should be immersed at any time and they should only be attended by a single officiant/clergy member.
- During the immersion, clergy/the officiant can place their hands on the head of the person being immersed, but they should not 'cradle' the person or touch them in any other way

- Clergy/the officiant should wash their hands after each person is immersed, or if this isn't possible they should use hand sanitiser.

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