

Make Church Accessible After This Pandemic

The Covid-19 Pandemic saw an influx in different ways that church was being done. For the vast majority of people, church moved to an online platform enabling congregations to meet digitally. This provided much needed comfort and a taste of 'normal' for many.

Research conducted by Tearfund shows that there has been a significant increase in church engagement since the pandemic and the shift in how we do church. Plus, you only have to look to social media to see how so many individuals and families with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have finally been able to connect with their local church as a result of it moving online.

In this guide I attempt to give you ideas of what you can be thinking about, planning for and doing as churches prepare to reopen for services. I want to help you remain accessible to all those individuals and families that have joined your church during lockdown. Hopefully you'll find some practical advice and ideas that will be really helpful. I'm sure it goes without saying that this is an area that is rapidly changing and so there will inevitably be things that I have missed. Please feel free to get in touch if you have any further suggestions or questions!



Firstly, the government has released 'Covid-19: Guidance for the safe use of places of worship from 4 July'. Please read this closely before making any plans to reopen your church buildings. Keeping our communities safe has to be a top priority.

Safety Measures

For many there is a lot of anxiety around going back to a church building for services. Reassuring the congregation that the necessary safety measures have been put into place will help to ease this anxiety. I recommend that this is done before you reopen your church building, for example in an email, and then have signage up around the building as reminders. Furthermore, ensure that all staff team and volunteers are abiding by the guidance. Seeing it modelled will be a real comfort.

Continue to Stream

As churches begin to reopen, and society continues to return to some form of 'normal', not everyone will feel comfortable leaving their house. For some individuals with health problems, it won't necessarily be safe for them to go out and they may have been advised to continue to stay home by their doctor or consultant. Even if individuals can leave their house, they may feel very anxious about doing so. The bottom line is, not everyone will be rushing back to church as soon as they can. By continuing to upload your services online then you ensure that the portion of the congregation that is unable to get to the building are still able to access the service. Another point to consider in this area is that the after service refreshments is a huge part of being in the church family for many. For most churches, it seems unlikely that after service refreshments will be doable (see [Gov Guidance](#)), but if you will be having after service social time is some capacity then do consider how those remaining at home can be included in that. Could there be a church computer that has a zoom call on so people can chat to those at home as well as those in the building?



If, throughout lockdown, you have been running midweek groups online these may also be returning to 'in person'. Leaving the option of some people being at the group in person and some people being online means that those individuals staying at home are not excluded.

Continuing Involvement

It will be really easy for the individuals not physically present at the service to feel excluded and left out. One way to combat that would be to invite them

to be involved in the actual service. Could they maybe record the prayers or a worship song or the liturgy and then that is played in the service?

Structure

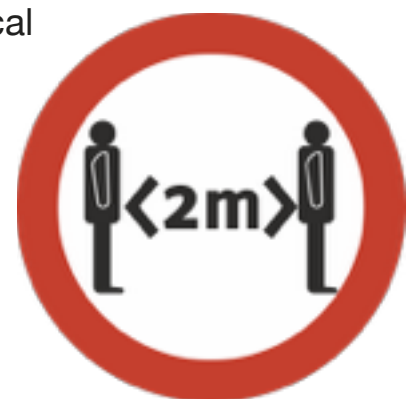
Knowing what is coming next is very important for lots of people. It reduces anxiety and confusion. This is even more essential at the moment when church is, once again, going to be done in a different way to what we have all just started getting used to. Providing a clear structure and time frame for your service is very good practise. You could consider emailing an 'order of service' type document out to your congregation before hand and/or have a visual timetable running along the bottom of the screen allowing participants to see what is coming up next in the service.



I encourage you to consider filming a short video walking around the building once it has been rearranged to enable social distancing etc. This will allow individuals to see what safety measures have been put in place and to take comfort from that. It will also allow individuals to begin to familiarise themselves with what will be their new surroundings and to process any anxieties that may come up as a result of the environment change.

Physical Space

I'm sure we're all very aware of how important the physical access to the building is. Almost all the places we visit (eg; shops, garden centres etc) have had to alter their layout to increase space and allow social distancing. How are you going to do this in church? Please consider maintaining this layout even once it is no longer required by the government as this makes wheelchair access throughout an entire building much easier.



For the vast majority of churches, altering their current layout, even just slightly, is almost inevitable, and for good reason. However, for some individuals, change can be really very difficult. If you are aware of any members of your congregation that need to sit in a certain place then please

do try to enable this wherever possible. Furthermore, I encourage you to consider if you have any members of your congregation with a visual impairment. These individuals may benefit from the offer of a private walk around the building, with it's new setup, whilst there are no other members inside, so they can familiarise themselves with their new surroundings. A staff member can explain to them where everything now is in the building and the new routes they will have to take, for example, to get to the bathroom.

Face Masks

Church staff and/or members may decide to wear a face mask while in the building. This is completely understandable, inline with government guidance and may well be the difference between an individual feeling safe enough to come to a church building or staying at home. However, if as a church staff member/leader you decide to wear a mask I encourage you to consider getting or making one with a clear panel in the front or even wearing a clear visor. This will enable individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing to be able to lip read, it will help individuals who rely on facial expression for their social queues and it will be a comfort to individuals with conditions such as dementia. Don't assume that just because your building has a hearing loop that this won't be dilemma relevant to you. If you are wearing a mask then the sound of your voice is muffled which means that the loop won't be able to be as effective. Lip reading is heavily relied upon by many individuals.



To read more about masks with a clear panel and to see where to purchase one then you can look [here](#). Or to see how you can make your own then look [here](#).

Signage

Church buildings are now going to have signage up to remind people of social distancing, hygiene, one way systems etc. When making or purchasing those signs please ensure they are dyslexia friendly, dementia friendly and just as accessible as possible. Things to consider:

- Contrasting colours
- Easily recognisable symbols
- Simple wording

- Text and sign size

For more detailed information on how to make your signs Dyslexia friendly then see the 'text formatting' section below or read our [Dyslexia Blog](#). For more information about dementia friendly signage then click [here](#) and/or [here](#).

Text Formatting

Just like in your online services, if you are putting words on a screen for lyrics or liturgy or are sending out notices before a service then please do follow all the normal clear text guidance:

- Fonts such as ariel, comic sans, century gothic and helvetica neue are already on most computers and are most accessible for individuals with conditions such as dyslexia.
- [Open Dyslexic](#) and [Lexie Readable](#) do have free fonts that are specially designed for easy reading. Once downloaded, you then use these like any other font on you PC.
- Minimum font size of 13
- Line spacing ideally minimum of 1.25
- If possible send out copies of song lyrics, readings and liturgy before hand so people can download and print if necessary.
- Avoid using pale text on a pale background. Ensure that the print contrasts with it's background.



Interactivity

Try and think about the different senses that you can engage throughout the service. Don't just require people to sit and listen for the whole time! Is there an object to hold that is then used as a prayer aid? Be as creative as you can be and think about how all the senses can be engaged at different points throughout the service.



Visuals

If you are using visuals in your service, for example film clips, then do consider how someone with sight loss will access that resource. Potentially record a audio description of the visual to send to them in

advance. Alternatively you could arrange for someone to be sat with them (abiding by social distancing guidance of course) describing it live.

Makaton

I have heard of lots of churches using lockdown as a time to introduce makaton to their services. Maybe by signing some of the worship or the liturgy. This is so encouraging to hear! If you started doing this in your online services then continue to do it in your services in person. If you haven't looked at Makaton yet and considered it something to include in your services then I again encourage you to do that. Becky George has some great free resources specifically for churches [on her youtube channel](#).



I hope the above has given you some things to think about and has directed you to other sites with useful resources and information. Planning to reopen a church building, making it as accessible as possible **and** ensuring it's Covid Secure is a big task. Don't pressure yourself to rush it and be kind to yourself. We are living in unprecedented times that we haven't had training for. Let's work together to do our very best.

Please do get in touch if you have any questions or scenarios specific to your setting that you would like advice on. I'm more than happy to help!

Written by Emily Williams, Disability Advisor.