

COVID-19 Advice for Services during Lent, Holy Week, and Easter Issued by the Bench of Bishops of the Church in Wales Version 1 26 January 2021 (Alert Level Four)

The following guidelines are offered to churches concerning the services, ceremonies and other activities during Lent, Holy Week and Easter. They should be read in conjunction with the latest COVID-19 provincial guidance (available [here](#)). Particular reference is made here to the following statement:

“Whilst places of worship can, by law, remain open for worship, funerals and weddings, Welsh Government is strongly advising that ‘those who are responsible for places of worship should consider whether there are alternative ways of holding worship services’.

The Bench of Bishops does not, at this time, require the suspension of in person worship but alternatives to in-person worship should be pursued where possible.”¹

With those cautions in mind those planning worship during Lent, Holy Week and Easter should adhere to the following regulations and guidelines. Each point remains subject at all times to amended laws and regulations which may be issued by the Welsh Government as the circumstances of the pandemic change. Hence, were an outright ban on singing to be imposed, for example, the guidance for points 4, 7 and 18 would need to conform to the new regulations. In the light of changes in restrictions implemented by the Government an amended version of this document may be issued and so churches are asked to be vigilant in ensuring that they follow the most recent advice. Churches are also reminded of [statements issued by the Bench of Bishops concerning worship](#) for observance during the pandemic period, particularly guidance concerning the celebration of Eucharist and the continuing requirement that Holy Communion be in one kind only (the consecrated bread).

The guidelines which follow are based on the advice issued by the Church of England’s COVID-19 Recovery Group, with amendment to the particular context in which the Church in Wales operates. The work of the Recovery Group is gratefully acknowledged.

I. Can we use ash on Ash Wednesday?

Yes, though some changes to established practice will be necessary. One key adaptation is to avoid the physical marking of individuals’ foreheads with ashes in the form of a cross and to sprinkle the ashes over the penitents in turn. Whilst this form of distribution is uncommon in English-speaking nations there is a long precedent for the use of sprinkling in other countries.

- If ash is being produced locally, this should be done in a hygienic manner.
- As the ash is to be sprinkled and not applied, the addition of oil or any other substance is unnecessary.
- The words customarily spoken by the priest at the imposition are spoken to the whole congregation before the distribution commences in order that each individual imposition can take place in silence.
- The priest imposing the ashes should sanitize hands immediately beforehand.
- Standing at arm’s length and wearing a face mask, the priest sprinkles the ashes on each recipient’s head (the recipient also wearing a mask) without touching them or speaking any words.
- If the priest accidentally touches the recipient, they must sanitize hands again.
- Individual, single-use implements to apply ash to the forehead should be avoided.

¹ [Coronavirus \(Covid-19\) guidance - The Church in Wales](#)

- The imposition of ash in places other than in church 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 parsonages) unless they are support groups. Gatherings in church must be for 'communal worship'.

3. Can the Stations of the Cross or Stations of the Resurrection be used?

If the Stations are to be prayed as a group and in person, worshippers should not gather around the stations, touch them, or walk between stations. Physical distancing must be preserved. Subject to the limitations of copyright, 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.

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

Such gatherings are possible only if the performance takes place in the context of communal worship or some other authorized activity. Special account needs to be taken in advance to the specific protocols in place relating to music and other performances, such as [regulations for singing in places of worship](#).

5. Can palm crosses be distributed?

Yes, subject to the following requirements and guidelines.

- If palm crosses are being made locally, this should be done in a hygienic, Covid-secure manner.
- If crosses are to be collected or distributed, they should be enclosed in envelopes in order to limit physical contact.
- 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. May outdoor services / processions / walks of witness be held?

- Welsh Government regulations state that "worship and belief ceremonies cannot be held outdoors in alert level 4."² Unfortunately, therefore, that rule prevents Palm Sunday processions outdoors and other similar acts of witness whilst government regulations forbid them.
- Furthermore, due to safety concerns and the difficulty of maintaining social-distance throughout, processions inside the church building are not recommended at this time.

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

Yes, subject to the following safety measures:

- Where it customary for more than one person to participate in the reading of the Passion, normal social-distancing measures must be observed. In those churches where the congregation is invited to assume the role of the crowd they should remain masked and be asked to keep their responses suitably restrained in volume. However, the main 'actors' need not wear masks for the reading provided that they remain appropriately distanced from each other and from the congregation.

² [Guidance on reopening places of worship: coronavirus \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

- If the Passion is to be sung, the current [regulations for singing in places of worship](#) must be followed. The number of singers should be kept to the absolute minimum.

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

Yes, provided that the following is observed:

- Limits on numbers permitted to attend public worship in a particular church must be respected.
- Given these restrictions, 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 foot-washing take place at the Eucharist of the Last Supper?

This ceremony involves close personal contact and so should not take place under the current circumstances. In fact, Welsh Government guidance relating to places of worship states that “people should not wash the body parts of others.”³

10. Can the Maundy Thursday Watch take place?

Provided that guidelines on private prayer are observed this can lawfully continue. However, many churches will be unable to guarantee the safety and hygiene measures required to keep a church open overnight. Churches are also reminded of the Welsh Government’s guidance to reduce ‘the time over which an activity takes place’. Therefore a Maundy Thursday watch over several hours (or overnight) is not recommended.

11. Can the Three Hours’ Devotion on Good Friday take place?

Whilst such a devotion is regarded as public worship, churches are asked to bear in mind the governmental guidance which states that ‘reducing the time over which an activity takes place as well as mechanical ventilation and utilising natural ventilation such as keeping doors and windows open are all mitigations to manage the risk posed by aerosol in places of worship.’⁴ As such, any service that takes place over an extended period (which three hours certainly is) is not recommended.

12. 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.

13. Can we venerate the Cross?

Not in the traditional manner. As the Government’s guidance indicates, “individuals should be prevented from touching or kissing devotional and other objects that are handled communally.”⁵ An alternative means of veneration (such as a bow) is permissible provided that the church can ensure the physical distancing of all participants at all times.

14. Can ministers distribute eucharistic bread previously consecrated at the Good Friday Liturgy?

Yes. The bread must have been consecrated in accordance with all the hygiene protocols and then stored, retrieved and distributed carefully and hygienically.

³ [Guidance on reopening places of worship: coronavirus \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

⁴ [Guidance on reopening places of worship: coronavirus \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

⁵ [Guidance on reopening places of worship: coronavirus \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

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

As point 6 notes, Welsh Government regulations during alert level 4 prohibit any acts of worship outdoors. So, whilst remaining at Level 4, an outdoor dawn service is not possible, nor is it possible to hold part of the Easter Vigil outdoors.

16. Can the new fire of Easter be kindled? May candles be used?

Yes, provided that physical distancing can be maintained around the fire and bearing in mind the ban on outdoor gatherings (during Level 4 restrictions). Candles should be distributed with a minimum of person-to-person contact. Churches will need to reflect carefully on the safety issues associated with kindling the Easter fire indoors.

17. Can the Easter Candle be marked and carried around in procession?

Yes. To minimise contact the number of people handling the Easter Candle should be kept to a strict minimum.

18. Can the Exsultet (the Easter Song of Praise) be sung?

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

19. May Easter gardens / flowers be arranged?

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

20. Can family services / all-age worship be held?

Yes: some churches will wish to hold family services / all-age worship of a less formal nature than the traditional liturgies described above. Such gatherings clearly constitute worship and would be allowed under the current restrictions. However, such services must comply with regulations in place for communal worship such as social distancing, hygiene practices, minimising contact with communal surfaces etc. That said, churches may need to adapt the activities which would normally take place during family services so as to maximise safety.

21. Can Messy Church / Messy Easter take place?

Yes: Messy Church and Messy Easter are regarded as acts of worship and therefore may continue under the current restrictions. However, the following points are to be noted:

- Churches are asked to undertake careful health and safety assessments of any planned activities well in advance. For example, any craft activities would need to take place with families seated at separate tables and with adequate social distance from other bubbles whilst minimising contact between groups and observing fully all other required protocol such as the wearing of face-coverings.
- Careful reflection on the advisability of such gatherings is needed particularly when circumstances in Wales require schools to remain closed to the general population. Even when schools reopen remember also that some churches will bring together children from different schools and therefore increase the possibility of virus transmission from one school to another.
- Bearing in mind the potential risks associated with communal surfaces, shared equipment etc it is advised that each family group brings its own materials from home wherever possible.

22. Can refreshments be served?

No: refreshments should not be served whilst current restrictions are in place.

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