



# COVID-19 GUIDANCE

## Faith leaders: Safe gatherings

**Church gatherings should only be held if and when permitted. Government and public health authorities at local and national levels are the primary source of information and advice about Covid-19** in communities, and can provide information about locally mandated restrictions. Those organising a gathering should comply with official guidance on the movement of people, whether gatherings are permitted and, if so, what size of gathering is allowed. If a medium or large gathering is planned, the organisers should establish and maintain contact with the authorities in the build-up to and during the gathering. If gatherings are permitted, churches should take the following steps to reduce the threat of Covid-19 in their community.<sup>1</sup> **If they are not able to perform these steps to keep their community safe, then the planned physical gatherings should be cancelled.**

In normal circumstances	During the Covid-19 pandemic
Under normal circumstances, we should not stop meeting for worship. However, these are unprecedented times.	<b>We should now listen to our earthly leaders and stop meeting for a while</b> to avoid spreading the highly infectious Covid-19. It does spread in large crowds and through close contact, such as in services with many people attending.
	Faith should not be opposed to medical advice. Sadly, gatherings have continued in some parts of the world because people have not listened to scientific advice and as a result many have contracted the virus.

<sup>1</sup> This material has been adapted from the World Health Organization's guidance for [Faith-based organisations and faith leaders](#).

For further biblical resources to help when cancelling church gatherings, see these two Tearfund Bible studies:

- [‘Distancing’ and the good Samaritan](#)
- [Loving our neighbours](#)

Once decisions have been made about gatherings (only if and when permitted by local authorities), it may be helpful to make explicit any adjusted practices and measures. This could mean displaying them prominently at the entrance of the place of gathering (in writing or as drawings).

If remote/virtual gatherings are not feasible, keep the duration of the gathering to a minimum to limit contact between participants. Ensure people **maintain a distance of at least one metre (three feet) at all times.**

Covid-19 is spread through respiratory droplets when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. These droplets can land on people or be breathed in by those close by. Churches should protect their members by helping them maintain a safe distance (‘physical distancing’).

- Discourage non-essential physical gatherings and organise virtual gatherings through live-streaming, television, radio, social media etc.
- If a gathering is planned, consider holding it outdoors. If this is not possible, ensure that the indoor venue has adequate ventilation.
- Regulate the number and flow of people entering, attending and departing from worship spaces to ensure safe distancing at all times.
- Gatherings with fewer people are better than crowded sessions. Religious leaders and communities of faith should consider multiple services with a few attendees, rather than hosting large gatherings.
- The numbers and flow of pilgrims at pilgrim sites should be managed to respect physical distancing.
- Participants in faith services should sit or stand at least one metre (three feet) apart. Where necessary, create and assign fixed seating to maintain safe distances.
- Identify a room or area where a person could be isolated if he or she becomes ill or begins to develop symptoms.

## Prevent physical contact between people attending faith services

Many church traditions involve physical contact between worshippers. Respiratory droplets containing Covid-19 can settle on a person’s hands and can be passed on to others through physical contact. Church leaders and communities should consider how worship practices and community

connections can be adapted to prevent physical contact in services and other faith- or community-based activities.

**Create new ways for your community to greet one another that reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission.** Some greetings being adopted within faith communities include:

- Replace hugs, kisses and handshakes with a bow or peace sign or using a greeting in sign language while maintaining physical distance.
- Greet people at the entrance to worship spaces with friendly words and smiles, rather than handshakes or other forms of physical contact.

Many worshippers share a 'sign of peace' during services, including handshakes and hugs. These are being replaced by, for example:

- eye contact and a bow while saying 'the peace' to others
- a communal 'sign of peace' offered in unison, orally or through a bow, by everyone in unison, while staying at a safe distance from each other.
- any form of culturally and religiously sanctioned alternative that avoids physical contact

Some church traditions include touching or kissing sacred and symbolic objects during worship services and prayer. The virus that causes Covid-19 can remain on such surfaces for hours or days.

**Church leaders need to protect their members from becoming infected by avoiding practices involving touching or kissing such surfaces.** Leaders can create and help community members accept new ways to revere these objects and symbols safely. Some religious leaders and faith communities have encouraged their members to:

- bow before sacred statues or icons, instead of touching them
- receive a blessing from at least a metre away and avoid the distribution of holy communion that involves placing the wafer on the tongue or drinking from a shared cup
- empty fonts of holy water to prevent people from dipping their fingers into a communal bowl
- eliminate rituals involving touching such as foot-washing, and substitute appropriate practices.