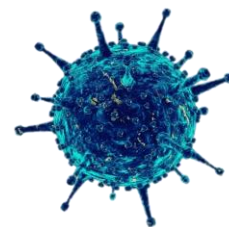


Covid-19: Acting Faithfully and Responsibly

Update 4: Life after Lockdown (priority 6) - 6th May 2020



When the Covid-19 lockdown was first announced, Baptists adapted well. Things changed in a matter of days, if not hours. Our leaders formed intentional networks to keep congregations in touch; many churches began to offer livestreams or formed networks through which a livestream could be accessed; foodbanks and other key community provision was maintained and many have become actively engaged in their community response. Our Associations and Specialist Teams have sought to support this, with ongoing practical briefings and resources to enable each other in ministry. For many, this was done with an initial expectation that one day restrictions would be lifted, and while things can never quite be the same, a similar single shift could be made to re-engage with life “post-lockdown”.

Before continuing further, it needs to be stressed that this overview is speculative – it is written to help church leaders reflect on possible outcomes – it does not represent any official advice or policies and should not be read as such. It is designed to help you engage with the implications of policy as it emerges - IT SHOULD NOT BE USED OR CITED AS AN ALTERNATIVE OR EXAMPLE OF OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT POLICY AND ADVICE.

A phased restoration

We are recognising that it is extremely likely that the removal of social distancing and isolation measures will be phased. This is likely to affect churches in four broad areas:

The wider context: It looks as though specific sectors in society will be re-opened one at a time. (e.g. non-food shops might re-open before bars and restaurants.) We have no idea how churches and places of worship will be perceived by policy makers, when our activities will be able to resume, or whether this will be possible all at once. So far, we have “operated in lockdown” as part of a national reality; everyone is in the same situation – it may well be in days ahead that churches remain closed while other sectors are opening, or vice versa. Leaders might helpfully reflect on what impact this might have and how they will respond and adjust. We will also be operating and ministering against a shifting backdrop in wider society, other groups, business and organisations will also be impacted by various changes, which will in turn affect the lives of those around us.

Events and activities: Church services and places of worship might be recognised as a sector in their own right, or may be treated more generally. This might result in gatherings of (say) no more than 25 being allowed, but nothing bigger. It may be that certain activities (e.g. services, educational activities, children’s activities) are allowed but not others. There may also be some restriction in what can actually be done within these activities. For example, it may be possible to gather for worship but not share communion, take up an offering, exchange the peace etc. How will a church respond if certain things are re-started but not others? It is not infeasible that a church might be encouraged to re-start some community activities but not its Sunday gatherings – how would we respond to this?

People and behaviours: The third area to consider is that even if churches are able to resume their full programme, this is likely to take place under specified conditions. This will not only require practical planning and organisation, but is likely to affect the feel and scope of these events. For example, how might we arrange a Sunday service where there is a requirement to maintain a 2m social-distance between everyone in the building? Who would be responsible if this is not observed? What practical measures would need to be in place first? Coupled with this, there may also be restrictions on who can or cannot attend. Suggestions circulating in the media include certain age groups continuing to be restricted, people with

certain health conditions remaining restricted or people only being allowed to freely circulate if they have downloaded specific software into their smartphone. This raises issues of conscience for some, as they see it as an infringement of civil liberties, for others it might simply be that they do not own a smartphone, and do not feel able to afford one. We might also note that irrespective of what statutory regulations are forthcoming, people may also wish to voluntarily observe restrictions – local churches may need to consider how they present the “obligations” of membership in a way that people do not feel unduly pressured or excluded, if they choose to self-isolate.

Covid-19 will not be gone: Much of the scientific narrative seems to indicate that the measures likely to be introduced, at least initially, will be less of a resumption of normality and more a matter of managing an ongoing threat. Local churches will need to reflect on their responsibilities towards their own congregation and the wider community in the light of this. Talk of a potential “second spike” highlights the possibility that some or all restrictions could yet be re-introduced. Churches that have developed resources, new approaches and networks to cope with the current situation, may consider it advisable to keep some of these in place, at least in the short term. This may in turn affect their capacity to resume their full range of other activities and programmes.

It is important that we recognise this and particularly consider how this will contrast with events that led up to ‘lockdown’. In many respects, the key decisions were taken for us, churches and places of worship were strongly urged to close their doors, as Baptists Together we embraced and promoted that approach, and within a relatively short space of time it had become law. Given the numerous factors that will influence it, coming out of this phase is likely to be far less defined, will impact different churches and congregations in different ways. It is likely to require churches and leaders to make specific decisions according to their own context and demographic. Things might begin to happen quite quickly, so it will be helpful to have considered these matters in advance, and to have some sense of response to various potential scenarios.

A Framework of Response

This will generate a number of challenges, and as we consider our response it might be helpful to recognise the various dimensions of this. In working this through we might helpfully consider:

Practical aspects: Taking social-distancing as an example, this might require us to look at seat arrangements, tape markers etc.

Pastoral aspects: Some of the decisions we make may be informed by practical realities, but they will have a pastoral impact on people. How might people react if activities that others value are able to re-start but not those that they value? This is before we recognise the pastoral impact of the ongoing situation.

Theological aspects: Restricted gatherings will also raise key questions about the nature of the church as the Body of Christ, especially if certain age groups or other individuals are intentionally excluded.

Missional aspects: Our behaviour and response will not only affect the regular congregation but the wider community too. The priorities that we give to community activities, and the way we react more generally, will be noticed and will affect how we are perceived. The possibilities outlined above, will also affect other aspects of community life – this may in turn generate needs and issues in the community that an outward looking church might wish to respond to.

Each of these generates a question that we might usefully apply to any emerging legislation or policy as it becomes clear:

What will this mean for us? What practical response will we need to make?

How will this affect us? What will people experience through this and how should we anticipate that?

How does this impact our understanding of church? How is our identity as the Body of Christ challenged or expressed by these restrictions?

What impact will this have in our community? What challenges and needs is this likely to generate in our neighbourhood, and how can we support people through it?

It may also be helpful to consider how these interact. For example, a church might manage to put all the necessary practical measures in place, but at what cost? When we gather, we gather to worship; what will be gained if people's focus is almost entirely on the measures they need to follow, rather than the God we are called to worship? Will it have been worthwhile if people return home stressed and exhausted from the responsibilities they now carry, or if visitors from the community are left disaffected after being turned away because the gathering is already "full"?

Numeric restrictions

Larger churches in particular may need to restrict the size of physical gatherings to the point where not everyone can attend. The most immediate question is whether, if this happens, a church would choose to remain closed for services until numerical restrictions are eased, or whether it chooses to re-open its premises within them. If the latter, how will this be done – several services staggered throughout Sunday or during the week? Concurrent services in more than one location? This might require churches to look at whether regulations consider two concurrent meetings in separate halls on the same premises as a single gathering. (if permitted, it is likely that entrances and exits would need to be entirely separate etc.) There are also the practical issues of how numbers are managed and restricted and also how several gatherings are led. Clearly if a minister or leader is having to arrange and lead numerous services instead of one, this will involve a considerable workload. Their capacity and wellbeing also need to be considered and maintained.

But there are also questions of a more theological nature. How would the church express its common identity if required to meet in smaller groups? Should those groups form voluntarily, or do they need to be deliberately planned and organised? At their best, small groups in church life can be a vibrant and authentic expression of Christian community, at their worst they can become divisive echo chambers where specific views, divisions and disaffections become entrenched. We have witnessed both within the life of our local churches! One aspect of this that will be of particular relevance to Baptists is Church Meetings; what practical arrangements might need to be put into place? How would we understand and experience "discerning the Mind of Christ in our coming together"? It is important to remember that this defining principle of Baptist identity is not simply a "democratic" one in which everyone has their say, but a "theocratic" one where, as the Body of Christ, we prayerfully listen, weigh and consider each other's perspective.

Social Restrictions

We need to recognise that limited attendance might not simply result from numeric restrictions, but because certain social groups are asked to remain isolated. Many churches acknowledge that their regular congregations contain a higher than average proportion of those who have been deemed as "vulnerable" in recent days. For all of that, many from this group also have key roles in enabling church events to happen. There are practical questions to be asked about whose roles are essential to things re-starting, and how might their regular tasks be fulfilled if they are prevented from undertaking them. This in turn raises pastoral issues about how this will impact those who are excluded, and also theological questions. The Church often defines itself as having a bias towards

the marginalised and disadvantaged – to what degree does re-starting activities for some, which inevitably means the exclusion of others, undermine this?

If we simply re-start things thoughtlessly, to what degree does church simply become yet another activity from which a significant cohort of our population are excluded? Might a church deliberately choose to keep its buildings closed, so as to concentrate on those within its membership and the wider community who are going to feel even more excluded and isolated if half the nation is “celebrating its freedom” while the other half remains “in lockdown”? What does it mean in such circumstances to *“let this mind be in you that was also in Jesus and . . . not conform to the standards of this world”*?

Activity Restrictions

Churches may also need to restrict their activities, or significantly change the way they are organised. While particular measures may, by default, enable some things to happen but prevent others, local churches might helpfully consider how “intentional” we need to be. For example, if there is a numeric restriction, it might be easy to assume that all those activities that meet this criteria (or at least met it before lockdown) can re-start. But are these the most important activities – are there other things that might be better re-started, even if this required a significant re-organisation? (An example might be spreading a parent and toddler group across 5 days so that everyone can attend, and deliberately not starting other things to create the space for this to happen.) What if two groups currently use different parts of the premises at the same time, and restrictions make it possible only for one or other to meet? Decisions of this nature will have pastoral and missional implications, so again it is important for leaders to engage with people and begin to think through your own priorities as a church, and the possible scenarios that might emerge.

It will be impossible to imagine every scenario in advance, but it feels important for leaders to determine to not simply “passively respond” to emerging information and advice, but begin to deliberately consider and plan ways forward.

Social distancing

Whatever activities re-start, it is likely that some social distancing measures will remain in place for some time. This will have practical implications. Shops and supermarkets had to make significant changes before they could remain open. This included placing screens at checkout areas, tape markings to enable social distance to be maintained, sanitiser, staff at entrances to control access etc. etc. It is very likely that similar restrictions will be expected of churches – what do you need to be doing for this to happen? What extra volunteers might you need? What training will they need? Even if these measures are not required by law – people are now used to circulating in this kind of environment – in terms of outreach and mission, what impact might it have if people in the community see these things as absent in the local church setting? What are our responsibilities to care for people, irrespective of what minimums are required by law?

Capacity

Churches may need to acknowledge that in the “mixed economy” that initially emerges, we cannot fulfil every need and aspiration. Again it feels important to begin to recognise and consider this, making decisions not simply of the basis of practical capacity, but also to reflect on what our key priorities are going forward. For example, a local church might have attracted significant numbers of “visitors” to its livestream service – if we do not have the capacity to do both, is it more important to retain their engagement by remaining with livestream, or is it more important to restore regular gatherings for the sake of those who have faithfully attended them for some time? There does not

need to be a “one-size fits all” approach. Churches might return to Sunday gatherings, but invest in a midweek online gathering, deliberately developing a format and engagement that enables this.

This might also be a time for churches to work more closely together to take advantage of existing networks and relationships. For example, one local church might choose to remain closed for services but continue to offer an online service for those who continue to be restricted and isolated, or as a deliberate outreach event on behalf of the whole group. Things like this will take time to plan, so it might be helpful to begin these conversations sooner rather than later.

Reflecting on the impact of recent events

Much of the above largely assumes that things will simply resume where they left off, but we also have to recognise that much has changed in recent weeks. Every congregation is likely to be facing bereavement in some way or other, either directly through the loss of members, or through members of the congregation losing a loved one. Many will not have been able to experience and express the care and fellowship that would normally emerge through everyday church life – there may be need to find ways of working through the impact and consequences of this.

This is before we also consider how the experience of lockdown will have impacted everyone emotionally, spiritually and physically. For some at least, it may also have caused them to reflect on the nature and purpose of the church itself – and there will be need to work some of these things through.

This also needs to be a consideration when determining and planning which events should be re-started and when. We may be asking people to participate in shared activities, when they have not yet had the chance to process their own grief or unease in the ways we normally would. Our planning needs to be about more than what is possible, but also the pastoral priorities that need to guide our thinking.

There will be a number of narratives that need to be recognised and considered, both within the regular congregation and the wider community. There might be a sense of thanksgiving for having come through this, but there is likely to be an ongoing threat of infection for some time. While some might be grateful for a sense of “deliverance” – others will have suffered bereavement and loss, either of loved ones or of jobs, finance and security. Having learnt to recognise the significance of key-workers, it is important that this is not forgotten, but there may also be a need to affirm the roles of those who might feel devalued or lacking worth because their role had been deemed “non essential”.

It is impossible to anticipate all of the potential outcomes – those listed above are merely possible examples. Rather than trying to predict all of these, local leaders might be advised to give time to considering how the church will “listen” in the days moving forward – to ensure that everyone’s experience and feelings are being recognised and taken into account.

Advice or Regulation

It is quite possible that the measures put in place will be a mixture of “good practice” and “regulation”. This means again, particularly in respect of the former, churches will need to make decisions for themselves. Our Union will seek to offer advice and guidance as much as possible, but much is likely to depend on the specific circumstances that face each church. There is also some talk of there being some regional variations depending upon the infection and transmission statistics, so a single “national guideline” might not be possible. It is important that churches recognise what is advice and what is regulation. In responding to advice, the framework above might help:

Practical capacity: To what degree is the church able to put this advice into practice? What will it entail? What changes need to be made? How will these changes be communicated particularly in the face of established routines and habits?

Theological reality: How does this reflect or challenge our core values and beliefs? How might they inform our response to this? How can we engage with this in a way that reflects our key understandings of who we are?

Missional Example: How will our response be perceived by our community? What needs and challenges will this generate within the community? Who is likely to be affected – how can we express God’s love and concern in the light of that? What should we be saying and doing as a Gospel people? This may impact not simply whether or not our buildings are open, but the purposes they are used for.

Pastoral Implications: Who is likely to be affected by this and how? In what ways should this impact our response? What actions do we need to take to avoid or respond to the pastoral issues that arise? How will this impact our sense of unity?

Capacity and Expectations

The sudden change in circumstances has affected everyone. Meetings have been cancelled, events postponed and working practices have changed radically. In some cases, it will just be accepted that things that were planned to take place have been abandoned, but in other cases there is a real expectation that things have been postponed, and will take place at a future date. It may even be that, at least in the eyes of some, these things have taken on a greater significance as a result of their curtailment. One obvious example is the many families who have had to hold short, restricted committal services for a loved one in the anticipation of a larger gathering taking place later in the year.

As planning for the future begins, it could be important for leaders to begin to identify what retrospective or postponed events and activities people will be expecting to take place. Consideration will need to be given to whether there is realistic capacity to fulfil all current expectations, and perhaps again to prioritise things – or even think creatively about whether things can be somehow combined.

Taking Stock

While all of the above remains relevant, the impact of the events of recent weeks has yet to be fully realised. People have been impacted as individuals, our communities have been impacted, society as a whole has been impacted and as a local church, we too will have been impacted. While we have used the language of “resume” and “re-start”, we need also to recognise that this is also a time to reflect and share the lessons that have been learned. As we look at wider society, we can perhaps detect two conflicting narratives; one is keen to try and restore things as much as possible to what they were – the other is seeking to ask questions and allow our recent experience to reshape the world that we seek to build going forward. These narratives may often be in conflict, each in different ways serving different interests.

Churches too are likely to find themselves in the same tension. Leaders are not immune from this, and will have been impacted on a personal level by current events, as well as it shaping their understanding of their own role and the purpose of local church. Another question that might usefully be considered is how a local church enables its own reflections and conversations around recent events. Perhaps, once restrictions are eased, the key question is not so much “what can be resumed?” but “how do we need to re-group and re-gather as church BEFORE previous activities begin to resume?” In the early days, reality might become a mix of these two.

Communication

In moving forward, communication will be vital. We are likely to need to outline significant changes to established routines, to explain key decisions, and take soundings of response at a time when our regular channels of communication have been disrupted. It will be useful to consider how local leaders can engage to ensure that there are clear understandings of expectation moving forward. This may not only require communication within the church, but across the wider community.

Spirit-Led

As highlighted at the outset, much of the discussion above is speculative, and is offered more to illustrate possibilities than define likely outcomes. Each church will need to discern what is right for its own context, and in so doing we might all engage prayerfully in seeking the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit. This narrative is offered as one resource that you may wish to draw on as you seek God's purpose. As we do this, let us also join together in praying for one another as we seek to walk forward faithfully and responsibly.

And finally . . .

Please note that there is as yet no clear indication of when and how isolation and social distancing measures will be lifted. This document has been prepared to help you start to think things through, it is not intended to indicate that any changes are immanent or to suggest what these might be. IT IS VITAL that you pay careful attention to emerging Government advice. As much as possible, Baptists Together and Association Teams will seek to update you with that advice as it emerges.

May we all continue to know God's wisdom and presence in these difficult days.