



Securing and Caring for your church buildings during the Covid-19 pandemic: advice for incumbents, churchwardens and vestry members

Following the Republic of Ireland and UK governments' recent announcements in relation to restriction of movement and social distancing we find ourselves in uncharted territory. As an All-Ireland church we are monitoring this situation across the island and paying particular attention to the guidance issued by the public health authorities in both jurisdictions.

In keeping with both governments guidelines all churches have been asked to close their buildings until further notice. This is both to reduce travel and to help maintain best practice in maintaining social distancing.

Government and Church guidance is clear; people can only meet with members of their own household. People have been told to stay at home and only make journeys that are absolutely necessary, such as shopping for essential items and to take daily exercise. The Church must take a lead in following this in order to slow down the spread of the virus.

Following on from this it will be necessary to make some basic checks on your building to ensure it remains secure at this time.

How to close the church building for an extended time.

Should we turn off the Electricity?

Where possible turn off and unplug all unnecessary electrical equipment. Check manufacturers' instructions about turning off kitchen equipment.

If you are turning off the mains supply completely, check there are no unintended consequences – such as turning off any alarms, communications devices powered from the church supply, the clock tower or any de-humidifiers etc. It would be best to leave such devices operational.

Should we turn off the water?

If there are no operational pieces of equipment that needs a water supply, ie sprinkler systems, then the water supply may be switched off, if appropriate the system should also be drained down.

If the water is left on make sure there are no taps left running or leaking fittings.

Be aware when it comes time to re-open the church that there could be an issue with water storage tanks or plumbing spurs which could become infected by legionella. It may be prudent to schedule testing and make sure you give time to run fresh water through your system.

Should we leave the heating on?

Many systems today have controls that make it possible to leave on a frost setting so that when the temperature falls below a certain level it turns on the heating. If your system does not have this then heating should be on minimum settings until we reach a point where there is no risk of freezing.

Should we stop access to the site, as well as to the church building itself?

In both jurisdictions the current advice is that graveyards can remain open, (NI Legislation was amended to allow this 24th April 2020) however this is on a restricted basis. It is important to note that social distancing regulations fully apply and the guidance issued by public health authorities should still be adhered to.

Please refer locally to the relevant Government guidelines for specific detail.

What should we be aware of when we lock up?

If there are items of value in the church, these should be put away securely, in a safe if there is one, certainly they should not be left out on display.

Be sure to check that the entire space is empty of people and animals that could be trapped before you lock up.

Remove all internal waste and position all external bins at least 5 metres from the buildings (or otherwise as far as possible where this is not possible) and secure the bins in position where this is possible.

What can we do?

How do we keep an eye on the building?

Any checking of the buildings needs to be done in accordance with the government guidelines on travel.

It may be reasonable for **one designated person** to enter the church to check that it remains safe and secure, provided they follow government guidelines and have access to appropriate materials to sanitise surfaces such as doorknobs. This must **NOT** happen on a rota, as numerous people entering the building, would represent a transmission risk, and must be limited to essential maintenance checks only.

It may be necessary to have a contingency plan in place for checking the building should the original designated person take ill or need to isolate for a period of time.

What about access to the church for winding the clock and/or changing the time, servicing or surveying for telecoms infrastructure and other essential activities?

Any access that is required must be in accordance with government guidance for essential travel and social distancing.

Servicing or surveying of telecoms infrastructure is an essential activity and the equipment provider may still require access to the tower.

Correcting the time of the clock does not justify the risk of a lone person climbing the tower, and we do not recommend this happens while the current lockdown restrictions are in place.

Building Work

My church is part way through a building project. What should we do about contractors and making the site safe and secure?

Up to date government advice should always be followed. The construction industry has guidance that all contractors should be aware of and following. With many builder's supply yards closing, most works will come to a stop. Ideally the only works still being carried out should be due to safety requirements to protect structures, the public and property.

If you have works on site and they have stopped please make sure that the site is left secure and if possible, alarms are set. Anything that could attract thieves and vandals should not be left lying around the site and should be put out of harm's way securely.

If building works are continuing within the church, clergy should not enter the building to record services. Surfaces in the building could potentially be contaminated and evidence to date suggests this can remain for at least 72 hours.

We were just about to start a building project; can it still go ahead?

We would strongly recommend not starting any works at present, unless they are to deal with immediate safety and security issues.

If it is considered essential for works to take place, then up to date government guidance should be adhered to.

Should Quinquennial inspections go ahead?

No, whilst the inspection is important it is not considered essential to carry it out at this time.

FURTHER INFORMATION FROM: property@rcbdub.org