

# Direction Related to COVID-19 Pandemic for Bodies of Elders

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1. This document contains direction for elders. It is confidential and should not be distributed to others.—Titus 1:8.

2. **Contacting the Branch Office:** During this pandemic, elders and circuit overseers may face circumstances that are out of the ordinary or that they have not experienced before. While it is good to use sound reasoning, there is a need to avoid going “beyond the things that are written.” (1 Cor. 4:6) We wish to assure you that the branch office is functioning and is here to give assistance. After researching a matter carefully, including this document, a body of elders may be unable to find direction from the faithful slave. (*sfl* chap. 1 par. 10) In that case, they should contact the branch office. Unless the matter relates to the *Shepherd* book chapter 14 or is urgent for some other reason, it is best to write.

## GENERAL PRECAUTIONS

3. Various health authorities have recommended being especially alert to practice good hygiene, such as:

- Respect physical distancing, maintaining a two-metre gap between you and anyone not from your household.
- Frequently clean your hands with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unclean hands.
- When coughing and sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with your elbow or a tissue. Throw the tissue away immediately and wash your hands.
- Avoid close contact with anyone who has a fever and cough.
- If you have a fever, cough, difficulty breathing, or any other symptoms related to the coronavirus, seek medical care immediately and share your travel history with your health-care provider.
- Avoid the consumption of raw or undercooked animal products.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.

## SECULAR AUTHORITIES

4. Restrictions imposed by the government that affect our activities should be followed.—Rom. 13:1.

5. **Easing of Governmental COVID-19 Restrictions:** When the authorities remove restrictions on certain activities, you will need to consider prayerfully how this will affect your daily life. Generally, we should be more cautious than the secular authorities and our neighbours, who are often eager to resume activities for economic reasons. (Eccl. 7:12) Each family head must decide the wisest course for his household. (Gal. 6:5) Personal circumstances vary. Therefore, what may be a prudent decision for one family may be unwise for another. What may be safe in one area may be unsafe in another. To the extent possible, it may be best to stay at home. However, if you must leave your home, please continue applying the basic principles of health and safety, such as frequent handwashing, physical distancing, wearing a face covering, and limiting physical contact with older and high-risk persons. If you experience cold or flulike symptoms, it would be best to stay home and notify your health-care provider. While assisting publishers, elders must be cautious not to establish or to enforce rules.

## MEETINGS

6. It is the Governing Body's earnest desire that bodies of elders continue to conduct regular, weekly congregation meetings. Allowing the brothers and sisters to meet together, even electronically, and express their faith is much better than simply watching a recorded program. As noted below, making use of JW Stream should be considered only when other alternatives are not possible.

- **Present Programs by Videoconference:** The elders may choose to use online conferencing tools, such as *Zoom* or *Skype*. (For direction regarding the use of *Zoom*, see the document *Zoom Online Videoconferencing and Meetings* available in "Forms" on jw.org. Also, a brief video highlighting the benefits of using videoconferencing tools for congregation meetings is available in the "Event Media" section of the "Documents" tab on jw.org in English.) These tools allow the brothers and sisters to see each other, offer comments, and present their meeting parts from home. In this way, they can 'encourage one another.' (Heb. 10:24, 25) If it is not practical to tie-in all publishers in one videoconference, the elders could arrange a number of smaller videoconferences, perhaps according to field service groups. In all cases, publishers would connect from their own homes. There would be no need for them to meet together in person.
- Bible students, interested persons and those who are inactive may be included in arrangements for congregation meetings.
- Good judgment is required in determining whether to permit a disfellowshipped or disassociated person to connect to the meetings. If needed, the elders should remind him of when it would be appropriate to join and to leave such meetings.
- As it is not possible for publishers to share in the formal public ministry, the body of elders may decide to adjust the *Apply Yourself to the Field Ministry* section of the midweek meeting for local circumstances. If necessary, parts that include audience participation, such as *Digging for Spiritual Gems*, the *Congregation Bible Study*, and the *Watchtower Study*, can either be summarized or presented in a talk format.
- **Selective Use of JW Stream:** Making use of JW Stream should be considered only when other alternatives are not possible. JW Stream should not be used as a sub-

stitute for congregation meetings week after week. Jehovah's people rejoice at every opportunity to come together for worship and to express their faith by commenting, even if this must take place by videoconference.—Ps. 22:22; 122:1.

## FIELD MINISTRY

7. All forms of the public ministry (including the door-to-door work and any form of public witnessing) should continue to be suspended until further direction is received from the branch office. This applies equally to harbour witnessing, prison witnessing, special metropolitan public witnessing and all other forms of public ministry. Publishers may be able to take advantage of other methods of preaching such as witnessing to **people they know** by telephone, text message, email, or letter. All should use good judgment and exercise caution.

- **Telephone Calls:** Publishers should be considerate. Do not call too early or too late in the day. **Do not put a householder on speakerphone so that others can hear the conversation.**
- **Text Messages and Emails:** Text messages or emails should not be sent to individuals with whom you are not personally acquainted. In some cases, publishers who have sent such messages have received replies that are obscene or contain apostate content. Thus, it would be wise to limit text messaging and emails to return visits, Bible students, and other individuals with whom you are personally acquainted.

8. **Consideration for Pioneers and Field Missionaries:** The Governing Body understands that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ministry of auxiliary pioneers, regular pioneers, special pioneers, and field missionaries may be affected significantly. Pioneers should not feel any obligation to meet hour goals. Please take this into account when reviewing the service activity of these individuals.

## SHEPHERDING

9. During the current pandemic, our dear brothers and sisters need loving elders who will shepherd them and provide well-prepared, timely spiritual instruction. (Acts 20:28) Therefore, please maintain regular contact with each family in the congregation, including making shepherding calls, perhaps by telephone or videoconferencing.—Prov. 27:23; *sfl* chap. 25 pars. 1, 2.

10. **Inactive:** The elders should reach out to inactive ones and keep them updated as to adjustments in the meeting arrangements. (Luke 15:4-7; *sfl* chap. 25 pars. 13-15) If needed, elders may grant inactive ones access to congregations meetings using videoconferencing tools, such as *Zoom* or *Skype*, or recordings of meetings on JW Stream. The world situation may well move some to return to Jehovah.

## THEOCRATIC FACILITIES AND CONGREGATION RECORDS

11. Guests are currently not permitted at Bethel and all tours remain cancelled.

12. **Kingdom Halls:** Regardless of direction from secular authorities, the Kingdom Hall should not be used for any meetings (except what is outlined in paragraph 18) until further direction is received from the branch office. This applies even if the secular authorities begin to ease certain restrictions in the near future. Adjustments by the secular authorities do not automatically mean there are adjustments to theocratic activities. If the body of elders believes there is an exceptional need to use the Kingdom Hall, such as for a funeral

or a wedding, two elders should call the Service Department and explain the recommendation of the body of elders.

13. Depending on local restrictions, you should take reasonable steps to verify periodically that the Kingdom Hall and other theocratic facilities are secure if they are not being used during the COVID-19 pandemic. Contact the Local Design/Construction Department if assistance is needed to secure the facility.—*sfl* chap. 21 par. 26; chap. 22 par. 10; chap. 26 par. 4.

14. As our halls will not be in regular use for the foreseeable future, faults such as gas or water leaks, vandalism and break-ins may not be identified quickly. It is important that theocratic buildings continue to be maintained to the degree that is reasonable and safe at this time. Careful attention to these points will prevent minor issues from developing into more serious problems. As a reminder, no one should care for these tasks alone. Neither should groups of publishers be invited to attend. Of course, any arrangements made should be in line with the most up-to-date direction from the governmental authorities in your area regarding physical distancing and isolation requirements. With the above in mind, please arrange for the following to be completed:

- The internal and external condition and security of the Kingdom Hall should be checked weekly.
- Unnecessary electrical equipment should be unplugged.
- The building should remain heated and ventilated at regular intervals, but without wasting dedicated resources.
- Toilets should be flushed and taps run on a weekly basis.
- Mandatory maintenance and safety works, such as boiler servicing, should continue as needed.
- Any issues identified should be dealt with locally where possible. Contact the Local Design/Construction Department if advice is required.

15. **Congregation Records:** If you believe that the Kingdom Hall is particularly vulnerable to theft or vandalism, you should take steps to protect congregation records. It may be necessary to secure the files temporarily in the home of an elder.

16. **Literature and Magazine Deliveries:** All shipments of magazines and literature are suspended until further notice.

## **CONGREGATION EXPENSES**

17. The body of elders (or the Kingdom Hall Operating Committee if more than one congregation uses the Kingdom Hall) should determine if any Kingdom Hall expenses could be reduced during the COVID-19 outbreak, especially if the Kingdom Hall is not currently being used for congregation meetings. If more than one congregation uses the Kingdom Hall, the operating committee may be able to recommend a lower monthly contribution amount to the congregations. The body of elders in each congregation should review the congregation's expenses and the donations that are being received. If needed, monthly resolved donations, such as those in support of Kingdom Hall and Assembly Hall construction worldwide or the Global Assistance Arrangement, may be suspended. If despite all efforts, the publishers cannot support the remaining expenses, please contact the Service

Department for direction and assistance.—See the subheading “Insufficient Funds” in *Instructions for Congregation Accounting (S-27)*.

## **JUDICIAL AND OTHER SERIOUS MATTERS**

**18. Judicial Matters: (Not Scotland and Wales)** Judicial matters, including reinstatement hearings, may be handled at the Kingdom Hall. However, please note the following important points:

- Thoroughly disinfect the hall before *and* after use.
- Wash hands for 20 seconds on entering/leaving the Kingdom Hall.
- Physical distancing should be maintained at all times.
- Those over 70 are advised to stay at home as much as possible.
- Keep an accurate temporary record of visitors to the hall for NHS Test and Trace purposes for 21 days. Ask for consent to collect names and contact details. Advise visitors this is optional. See the sample template attached.
- If it is necessary to call witnesses to the hearing, two elders should contact the Service Department for direction before proceeding.
- Videoconferencing should not be used for handling judicial matters, including reinstatement hearings.

**19. Judicial Matters: (Scotland and Wales)** Videoconferencing should not be used for handling judicial matters, including reinstatement hearings. Until circumstances permit the hearing to be held at the Kingdom Hall, the matter may need to be held in abeyance. (*sfl* chap. 15 par. 8) If the body of elders believes that a judicial matter is urgent and needs to be handled immediately, two elders should contact the Service Department for direction.

**20. Medical Matters:** In cases involving pregnancy and elective surgery, the patient should ensure their refusal of blood is clearly noted on their hospital consent forms. Publishers carrying a completed *Advance Decision* document, even if this is older than four years, are doing all they can to avoid transfusion in an emergency. If you learn that a publisher is to be hospitalized, please remind them to take their mobile phone and charger. Shepherding care, including HLC support, depends on their remaining contactable.

**21. Modest Use of Electronic Tools:** In many lands, elders are using videoconferencing tools effectively to hold weekly meetings, to arrange for field service, and to shepherd publishers. As a kind reminder, elders should take care not to promote electronic tools in ways that go beyond what has been directed by the organization. (1 Cor. 4:6; *w17.1* p. 18 pars. 4-5) We commend you for your hard work in caring for the publishers entrusted to your care.

## **CONVENTIONS AND ASSEMBLIES**

**22. Arrangements for Viewing the 2020 Convention:** It is the Governing Body’s earnest desire that all in the congregation benefit fully from the 2020 “Always Rejoice”! convention. To strengthen and unify our brothers worldwide, it is our preference that all publishers view the convention sessions on the same weekends wherever it is possible and practical to do so.

**23.** If possible, the viewing of each convention session should be arranged on the weekend indicated below:

Schedule for Viewing 2020 Convention Sessions		
Weekend	Session	Date Available on JW Broadcasting*
July 11-12	Friday morning	July 6
July 18-19	Friday afternoon	July 15
July 25-26	<i>Normal weekend meeting</i>	
August 1-2	Saturday morning	July 23
August 8-9	Saturday afternoon	August 3
August 15-16	<i>Normal weekend meeting</i>	
August 22-23	Sunday morning	August 13
August 29-30	Sunday afternoon	August 24

\*It may take an additional three days for the convention session video to appear in *JW Library*.

- (1) No public talk should be scheduled on the weekend a session is viewed.
- (2) If a circuit overseer's visit or a circuit assembly is scheduled during one of the weeks, the viewing of the convention session should be postponed by one week.
- (3) As a reminder, the Kingdom Hall should not be used for these or any other meetings until further direction is received from the branch office.
- (4) Midweek meetings should be held as normal during the weeks in July and August that the 2020 convention sessions are viewed.

24. An abbreviated *Watchtower* Study should be considered by the congregation *before* the convention session is viewed. The study should last 30 minutes and be conducted by means of questions and answers without reading the paragraphs. If a videoconferencing tool, such as *Zoom*, is being used for congregation meetings, this tool should be used for the abbreviated *Watchtower* Study. Although the attendance count should be taken for the *Watchtower* Study, no count of those viewing the convention sessions is needed.

- (1) At the end of the *Watchtower* Study, announce that all who are able to do so should now view the current convention session **on JW Broadcasting** in their homes. This will provide a better viewing experience than watching the program using a videoconferencing tool. Announce that at the conclusion of the session, someone in the home can offer a prayer of thanksgiving.
- (2) After the announcement, sing the second song specified for the *Watchtower* Study and conclude with a prayer, acknowledging the convention program to follow.
- (3) The body of elders can decide if they would like to select a designated time later in the day for those who want to discuss the benefits of the program to meet in smaller groups by means of videoconference, such as *Zoom* breakout rooms. Or, with the elders taking the lead, publishers could be encouraged to discuss with one another throughout the following week points that they enjoyed from the program.

#### Additional Considerations:

- (1) If some publishers are unable to access JW Broadcasting, the elders may transmit the convention sessions to such ones by means of a videoconferencing tool, such as *Zoom*. After the *Watchtower* Study, these individuals would stay connected to enjoy the session. The session should be downloaded in advance to the host's computer.
- (2) Be reasonable and flexible. Due to family circumstances or other reasons, some publishers or families may choose to view the sessions at other times.

25. In view of the current pandemic, each *individual or family head* must decide the wisest course when it comes to meeting together as a family or to inviting a few others, such as Bible students, to view the session together. (Gal. 6:5) It would be good to remind the congregation of the need to continue applying the basic principles of health and safety, such as frequent handwashing, physical distancing, wearing a face covering, and limiting physical contact with older and high-risk persons.

26. **Baptisms:** Baptisms are not permitted at this time. When they become possible once again, those performing baptisms should take necessary precautions in accord with guidelines provided by the secular authorities to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

27. **Baptism in Connection With the 2020 Convention:** If the branch office has directed that baptisms can be resumed by the time of the convention, please make appropriate arrangements for any candidate(s) in your congregation who has been approved for baptism to be immersed locally. This should happen as soon as possible after the Saturday morning session is viewed, in accord with local circumstances. At the baptism, a local elder should ask the baptism candidate(s) the two questions appearing on page 206 of the *Organized* book and give him an opportunity to answer in the affirmative. The elder will then offer a prayer. Thereafter, the candidate(s) should be immersed. (*sfl* chap. 11 pars. 16-17) Please remember to report the number baptized to your circuit overseer. He will compile the number of baptisms in the circuit and send his report to the branch office.

28. **Circuit Assemblies During September Through November 2020:** Live circuit assemblies during the months of September through November 2020 are cancelled. If your congregation was assigned to attend a circuit assembly during these months, please organize the viewing of the assembly using the guidance in paragraphs 24-27. After the 30-minute *Watchtower* Study announce that all who are able to do so should now view the circuit assembly using the JW Stream link provided by the elders. (See *Access to Programs on JW Stream by Elders and Ministerial Servants* [S-142].) The elders may send the link to a disfellowshipped or disassociated person if he has regularly been attending congregation meetings.

#### THEOCRATIC SCHOOLS

29. All theocratic schools have been suspended until further notice.