

The one major ceremony in the calendar of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Memorial Meal to remember the death of Jesus Christ, is being affected by the coronavirus. This year it is due to be held on April 7th, the date of Passover, but for the first time, it will be an online rather than physical gathering. [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) roots are in the teaching of Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) from Pennsylvania, who founded the Bible Student movement and the Watch Tower Society. They have a strict moral code, regard themselves as separate from the world and are expected to evangelise. They are well known due to their knocking on doors with leaflets and delivering 'Watchtower' in town centres. They do not believe in blood transfusions, based on a reading of Biblical texts.

Background information on the Memorial by [Dr. George D. Chryssides](#),

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Even before the British government imposed its Covid-19 lockdown, Jehovah's Witnesses decided temporarily to cease their house-to-house evangelism and their use of literature carts in town and city centres. Although they believe that these were practices of the early Church which they ought to maintain, the Bible does not specify when or how often they should be done.

However, the Memorial (also known as the Lord's Evening Meal), which is due to take place on Tuesday 7 April this year, is a different matter. Jesus instructed his disciples, "Keep doing this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Jehovah's Witnesses believe this final meal was a celebration of the Passover, and consequently they have celebrated it annually on the 14th day of the Hebrew month Nisan, ever since the Watch Tower Society began.

Normally Jehovah's Witnesses would assemble in a Kingdom Hall after sunset on that evening, and in 2019 there were over 220,000 attendees in Britain, and nearly 21 million worldwide. This number normally exceeds the number of active members (slightly over 137,000 in Britain, and nearly 8.7 million worldwide), since members are encouraged to invite friends.

Even amid strong opposition, such as in Nazi Germany and present-day Russia, Witnesses have defied the law and celebrated the Memorial in secret. Today, however, the situation is different since, at least in most countries, gathering for the Memorial would not be an act of defiance against hostile governments, but a dangerous health hazard.

Accordingly, the Watch Tower Society has taken the view that they should "be in subjection to superior authorities" (Romans 13:1), obeying the government's requirement that there may not be assemblies of any more than three persons. The challenge therefore has been how they can simultaneously obey the law, while observing Jesus' command to celebrate the Memorial.

For some years, the Society has exploited the use of the World Wide Web as a means of evangelism, and the proposed solution to the problem is to explore the possibility of celebrating the Memorial online. Since this is entirely unprecedented, we need to wait to see the precise logistics.

According to the information I have received, attendees are arranged in groups of around twenty within their congregations, and they will use Microsoft Teams as a means of participation. In the past it has been acceptable for those who cannot attend the Memorial to listen via a telephone link, so presumably this facility will be permitted for those who lack Internet access. Although the Memorial will be observed within one's home, members are nonetheless instructed to dress as they would for the celebration in a Kingdom Hall – suits and ties for men, and modest dresses rather than trousers for women.

The Memorial requires bread and wine, and attendees are encouraged to have a glass of wine and unleavened bread in front of them. Since Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that there is any miracle of transubstantiation that takes place, there are no issues about whether bread and wine can be consecrated from a distance, or how the "emblems" (as they call them) should be disposed of afterwards. However, the wine should be red and unfortified, and the bread should conform to the recipe provided by the Society – whole-grain flour with a little water added, and baked, slightly oiled, on a cooking sheet. Jewish matzots might be acceptable, provided they are unseasoned and do not contain added ingredients such as eggs.

These emblems should be present, even though the vast majority of Witnesses will not consume them during the Memorial. Only the 144,000 "anointed class" may partake of the emblems, and they have largely died out. Attendees will therefore simply pass the bread and the wine around the congregation, although precisely how this would be done online remains to be seen.

I am informed that, for the first time, a recording of a Memorial celebration will be posted on the Society's website. This will certainly be an innovation and a landmark in the Watch Tower Society's history.

(pic [Steve Sadowski](#))