Regathering with Safety and Care: A Working Guide

MARCH - PRESENT
Shelter in place: online worship and gathering.

WE ARE HERE: MAY 2020
Prepare for regathering: clergy and lay leaders form a plan that follows state, local, and diocesan guidelines.

Our common life will likely continue as a hybrid of online and in person gatherings.

Implement plan as county and state guidelines adjust the stages of gathering.

Prayerfully attend to the new normal: what is the Holy Spirit calling us to as the church?

Continue with online worship, connection, and formation.

Vestry/mission committee receives and reviews plan for regathering in your church.

The Episcopal Diocese of Northern California
May 8, 2020
Friday, May 8, 2020

Dear Diocesan Clergy and Lay Leaders,

Grace and peace to you. We are writing to you as a leadership team: bishop, canon, governing leaders, and regional deans. We have been working together to research and structure guidelines for you as we make plans for our churches to regather in person.

As we look expectantly to a season of regathering, we wish to share with you some guidance for how our diocese will think through the details and safeguards that we need in order to keep our people safe and connected. We anticipate that this is the beginning of a 12-18 month process of planning and changing.

In previous messages, our diocesan leadership has articulated three priorities: We will observe public health initiatives as they are made known. We will strive to protect those who are the most vulnerable. We will work to slow the progression of illness through prevention and mitigation.

Our diocese spans such a vast geography that it makes sense for us to rely on local county leaders in much the same way that the state government is doing. Recognizing our different needs will help us all to respond most effectively.

Let us approach this regathering process bearing in mind that the risen Christ revealed himself repeatedly in the midst of gatherings both small and large: in the garden at first light, on the dusty road to Emmaus, at the table while breaking bread, at the beach beside a crackling fire, and in a room amidst fear and wonder. We know that Christ has met us fully and completely in our worship and gatherings over the past two months. As we turn to regathering in our worship spaces, with our community still dispersed, we know that the risen Christ will meet us over and over again.

The process of reopening is going to be harder than it was to establish physical distancing. We know more, but much remains unknown with ever changing data. We expect that our regathering will include a hybrid approach: some will still need to shelter at home. Therefore, we will want to continue the good work that has emerged through our online worship and connections.

Thank you for your beautiful offerings over the past months, and all that is to come, as we plan to regather in ways that are new and responsive to this unexpected and unknown future.

Your Sisters and Brothers in Christ
Regathering with Safety and Care: A working guide

About this document (May 8, 2020)

This is organized into the following sections:

- Action plan
- Questions for your team to consider
- Highly Recommended Actions
- Recommended Actions
- Direction from Bishop Megan – Communion Wine
- Gathering and Worship – considerations and instructions, including for Holy Eucharist

This document reflects several thoughtful resources generated by the wider church: many dioceses are borrowing from each other and widely sharing thoughts and documents. We also have had many conversations with our own leaders and governing bodies, as are following guidance from public health sources.

It is hoped that clergy and wardens who hold the authority and responsibility for the buildings, financial, and liturgical life of the church, will work together. This document is arranged into questions for you to consider as you make a regathering plan, and recommendations that you should use as guidelines for your plan.

We have tried to be clear about what is left for your local situation, and decisions that will be followed across the diocese. If there is any question, please do not hesitate to call the bishop’s office for assistance. In every case, we assume that you are following state and county direction. We intend for this to describe the ‘guardrails’ within which we can safely navigate this new road.

Connections and sources for this document:

- Episcopal Diocese of Maine, Bishop Thomas James Brown
- Input from diocesan wide COVID-19 zoom calls
- Office of the Bishop staff members
- Regional Deans
- Mr. Jim Sargent, Standing Committee President
- Rev. Michael Monnot, Board of Trustees Vice President
- Centers for Disease Control
- Church Insurance Company
- House of Bishops
- Episcopal Relief & Development
- The Episcopal Church and Presiding Bishop's Office
**Action plan**

Those responsible for worship, facilities, and administration of the church need to gather and create a plan for these next stages of pandemic response.

In addition to the priest in charge of the church, or the wardens in some cases, the following leaders might be consulted: Wardens, Musicians, Other key worship leaders, Altar guild, Ushers, Building management leaders.

During May, before you regather, work through the questions posed in this document, as well as questions you are considering that are specific to your community.

Your vestry or mission committee receives and reviews your plan.

We will revise and reissue this planning document regularly as new information is made available.

Please be flexible as new information is released and we learn more about local nuances and guidance for regathering.

Public health is divided by county in California. Please refer to your local public health department webpage.

*We are all people who value the care and community we share as one body in Christ. Our decisions and plans are based in the best scientific and health guidelines available, and with attention and respect for the dignity of our brothers and sisters; siblings in Christ.*
Questions for church leaders to consider

✓ With those in high-risk categories likely continuing to stay at home, how will you reach them and serve them during this time?

✓ Will you maintain an online streaming option once you are back together worshiping in physical space? How will that need to adjust when there is also in-person worship happening?

✓ Is your clergy comfortable returning to in-person worship?

✓ If you have clergy who need to lead worship from home, what roles might lay leaders take as you adopt a hybrid approach to liturgical leadership?

✓ How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshiping in family groups sitting 6 feet apart in every direction?

✓ Consider Morning Prayer or the Ante-Communion service for the first month of regathering, especially if the safety measures required for celebrating the Holy Eucharist will be too much for your congregation to manage right now.

✓ How will you cap attendance at events so there is room for members of the community to join you and so you don’t go over guidelines?

✓ Will services need a reservation list and more logistical coordination? Who does that?

✓ Can you continue small group gatherings online?

✓ Can you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?

✓ How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?

✓ How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection of your physical plant?
  
  o Areas where small groups gather during the week including classrooms, nurseries and/or playgrounds.

  o Pews or chairs following worship.

  o Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building.

✓ If someone attending in your worship community contracts COVID-19, who will communicate this to public health officials, and how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while still maintaining privacy and pastoral care?
If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?

How will you pastorally deal with people acting out or ignoring protocol?

How will you prepare your congregation in the event we experience a second wave and need to temporarily return to more assertive forms of distancing?

Additional questions to consider from other worship traditions:

https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/

Please note:

For worship, weddings, and funerals, consider gathering basic contact information from all attendees. Recording names will enable the Health Department to more quickly trace, test, and isolate individuals who may have been exposed to COVID-19 if an attendee had the virus at the time they attended the service or event.

Highly recommended

- High-risk individuals, whether clergy, staff, volunteers, parishioners, or program participants should continue to shelter in place.

- Churches with the resources to do so should continue using technology for online worship and meetings.

- All people should wear masks. Consider how you can provide masks to people who forget, or who don't want to wear one.

- The Peace: physical contact should be avoided.

- Drain and sanitize all holy water stoops and baptismal fonts.

- Plan on administering consecrated bread only. No wine may be consumed. See below for a specific direction from Bishop Megan regarding communion wine.
Recommended

- All levels of church leadership need to lead with knowledge and information to help our people cope with the changing nature of the phased community approach our health leaders will be taking.

- Leverage the work you have done in the past two months for mission in the community.

- Now is a time to continue renewing relationships through small groups, including through continued use of Zoom and other online platforms.

- It is appropriate to record worship from inside your church while maintaining appropriate physical distancing of six feet, and for all people to wear masks.*

- Governance and program committees of 10 people or fewer may consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing or continue to gather online. You might have a hybrid of online and in person meetings.

- Consider continuing to gather online for Bible studies and small groups; any in-person groups should be limited to the guidelines in your county for number of people who gather, and all people will wear masks at all times and maintain six feet of distance.

- Churches with out-of-state visitors and summer chapels need to consider the impact of people bringing infection in from an outside community.

- In-person Vacation Bible School is not recommended this year, and mission trips are inadvisable. Connecting with food pantries or other services (there are new opportunities right now) might be a great alternative.

- Drive-in worship services are not recommended.

*The CDC recommends wearing cloth face coverings in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain (e.g., grocery stores and pharmacies) especially in areas of significant community-based transmission.
Regarding Communion Wine - Direction from Bishop Megan

- Although the chalice with wine is to be clearly visible to all, no wine is to be consumed by anyone during the Eucharist: this is a shared restraint for the health of all.

- Please have a small amount of wine presented at the offertory.

- Pour the wine into the chalice and pray the Eucharistic Prayer, as usual, consecrating bread and wine.

- Leave the chalice on the altar; there to honor and represent Christ’s blood for all.

- Wine should be returned reverently to the earth following the service.

- No intinction or dipping or otherwise dripping wine onto the wafer using a dropper, or other method.

- This is a good moment to remember a core principle of our Eucharistic theology: the sacrament is complete when administered in just one kind; in this case, the consecrated bread.

Gathering and Worship

State and county limits on gathering will be the guide for each church regarding worship and other classes or meetings. Space available in your buildings and distancing may limit your numbers even more.

- If your attendance is more than the number of people allowed for your space, you might need to plan for overflow contingencies and think through the possibilities of increasing the number of services, as well as using reservation and tickets.

- All people should wear masks. Consider how you can provide masks to people who forget, or who don’t want to wear one.

- Physical distancing: Following public health directives, the space needed between people may limit the number of people you can have in your building, regardless of how many are recommended.

- Consider Morning Prayer or the Ante-Communion service for the first month of regathering, especially if the safety measures required for celebrating the Holy Eucharist will be too much for your congregation to manage right now.
**Greeters and Ushers** – Greeters and ushers will wear masks, so think through the implications of this as they welcome people. Be clear about your church policy on masks for ushers and greeters.

- Make sure that people use hand sanitizer upon entering the building.
- How will you greet without handshakes or physical contact?
- How will you share the order of the service? Can you use overhead screens and pack away BCP, hymnals or limit the use of bulletins until a later date? Is there a way to avoid entirely, or to limit, distribution of printed worship material (leaflets, bulletins, etc.) that must be handled?
- Think through how visitors can be oriented to the service and the space.
- How will you capture a visitor’s name and address?

**Offering Plates** - Determine an alternative to passing the offertory plates.

- Suggestion: have a few plates placed centrally in your worship space to collect offerings.
- If you have electronic and text-to-give programs continue and encourage their use.
- Think through how to communicate options for giving.

**Font and Stoup** - Drain standing holy water from all containers

- Do not maintain a font or open vessel of standing holy water near the entrance to or anywhere in the church
- Suggestion: Use baptismal symbols, such as an icon of the baptism of Jesus, river rock, or shells, in place of water in these vessels

**Passing the Peace** - Use an alternative greeting to shaking hands

- Keep masks on
- No hugs, kisses, or getting too close to each other’s faces
- Worship leaders cannot greet people at the back of the nave with hand-shaking and hugging; consider what this means and how connections can still occur.
- Suggestion: Bow to one another with your hands in a prayer position or place your hands on your heart, and say “peace be with you”
- Suggestion: Teach participants that this entire aspect of the liturgy is accomplished by saying the versicle and response.

**Coffee Hour and other socials with food** – follow all health department guidelines

- Give yourself permission to re-introduce coffee hour later in the season.
- If you have a coffee hour, carefully think through the highest regard for food safety. If food and drink are served, please consult and follow safety guidelines for sharing food in public settings.
- Suggestion: Consider having a ZOOM coffee hour following the service
Outdoor worship

- If outdoor worship is offered, including the use of a tent, please continue to follow the guidelines outlined in this document.

Holy Eucharist

- Plan on administering consecrated bread only. No wine may be consumed.

- Think through how to sanitize and re-sanitize while you administer the sacrament and how you will orchestrate your movements. This will vary for each congregation and space.

- Consider how persons can approach for communion and return to their seat without getting too close to others. Avoid contact with the rail, so as to minimize germ transmission, or clean the rail after people have touched it.

- If needed, serve the Eucharist from standing communion stations in front of the altar rail.

- Consult with a medical professional about using gloves; public health experts have suggested that what they've seen in some religious settings is not appropriate “glove technique.” Carrying the virus from one object to another is problematic, even with gloves on. If you use gloves, follow proper protocol.

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Music

- Singing has been identified by the Centers for Disease Control as a particular concern for spreading the infection.
- Consider alternatives to live singing or wind instruments.
- Can the worshipping assembly resume congregational singing later in the season?
- Think through the risk and liability of singing in your space. Review current research and professional recommendations with your vestry and musicians so that if the choir decides to sing everyone is aware of the risk and liability, and taking precautions to avoid illness.
- Are worship leaders willing to lead worship in a space where singing takes place?
- Suggestion: say the psalms with non-wind instrumental accompaniment.

Funerals & Weddings

- Weddings and funerals can occur while adhering to state and county restrictions, and continuing physical distancing plans discussed earlier in the document.*

*Please note that ordinations and consecrations are adjusting to the same limitations.

Eucharistic Visitors and pastoral visits

- Weigh the benefit to risk: Determine whether the visit is essential: can this contact be made by phone, video, or written note?
- Do not put yourself or others at risk of getting ill.
- If you are feeling sick, or hear that the one you are to visit is feeling ill, don’t visit in person.
- Engage people with virtual visits through a phone call or video calling. This may involve some teaching in how to use this technology.
- Work with staff and caregivers to help instruct the parishioner.
- Follow the recommendations of the public health departments and the care facilities in your area.
- Visitors must wear masks and sanitize hands frequently.
- Visitors may not bring wine from the Eucharist.
General Prevention:

**Wash Your Hands: Cover your Face: Observe Physical Distance**

- In all situations, the best practice to prevent any illness is to wash your hands frequently using proper technique: wet-lather-scrub-rinse-dry

- [https://www.who.int/gpsc/clean_hands_protection/en/](https://www.who.int/gpsc/clean_hands_protection/en/)

- In addition to frequent and thorough hand washing, use hand sanitizer as needed

- At all times avoid touching your face: particularly eyes, nose, and mouth. This is how germs enter your body

- When you cough, do so into your bent elbow, not your hand

- If you have a fever, cough, or any congestion; or feel like you might be sick; or live with someone that is sick or exhibiting symptoms, stay home. **This applies to clergy, lay ministers, musicians, and participants**

- If you are vulnerable to illnesses, stay home.

- Share the message: download hand washing posters here: [https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/keep-calm-wash-your-hands_8.5x11.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/keep-calm-wash-your-hands_8.5x11.pdf)

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**REOPENING FAITH COMMUNITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The purpose of this tool is to assist leaders of faith communities in making decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to check with state and local health officials and other partners to determine the most appropriate actions. When completing the decision tree, consider that faith communities may also provide social, educational, and child care services at their facility.

**Should you consider having in-person gatherings?**
- ✓ Is the facility in a community no longer requiring significant mitigation?
- ✓ Will reopening be in compliance with state and local orders?
- ✓ Will you be ready to protect staff and congregants at higher risk for severe illness?

**Are recommended safety actions in place?**
- ✓ Promote healthy hygiene practices such as hand washing, wearing a cloth face covering
- ✓ Intensify cleaning, disinfection, and ventilation
- ✓ Ensure social distancing such as no large gatherings, increased spacing, avoid holding hands, offer additional, smaller services
- ✓ Limit sharing of items such as worship aids and collection trays
- ✓ Offer virtual services if possible
- ✓ Train all staff and congregants on safety actions

**Is ongoing monitoring in place?**
- ✓ Encourage staff and congregants who are sick to stay home
- ✓ Plan for if staff or congregants get sick at facility
- ✓ Regularly communicate with local authorities, staff, and congregants
- ✓ Monitor staff absences and have flexible leave policies and practices
- ✓ Be ready to cancel in-person gatherings if there are increased cases

**Do not offer in-person gatherings**

**Meet safeguards before offering in-person gatherings**

For more information, please visit [Coronavirus.gov](https://coronavirus.gov)