



**Faith Communities Guidance Document  
Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion  
Office of the Governor  
VEST Health Equity Work Group**

**April 7, 2020**

**This document provides general guidance for diverse faith communities across all major ideologies and belief systems. This document is intended to be inclusive with the understanding that as new information emerges or additional needs or circumstances are identified, this document will be revised. It was developed with information from existing sources, such as FAQs from the Virginia Department of Health, the National Funeral Directors Association, and the Center for Disease Control websites. Suggestions for alternatives to traditional forms of worship were collected from informal faith leader advisory groups to the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. If you have an innovative suggestion for an alternative to traditional methods of worship, please email [DEIDirector@governor.virginia.gov](mailto:DEIDirector@governor.virginia.gov).**

**What about religious services? Can I still go to my church, synagogue, temple, or mosque?**

Executive Order (EO) 55 mandates a stay-at-home order. The executive order will remain in place until June 10, 2020, unless amended or rescinded by a subsequent executive order. A press release about EO 55 can be [found here](#).

Travel to a place of worship is permitted under EO 55. Places of worship that conduct in-person services must limit gatherings to 10 people, to comply with the statewide 10-person ban. However, given the extreme risk to public health, Virginians are strongly encouraged to seek alternative means of attending religious services, such as virtually streaming from home or via “drive-in or drive-through” worship. The decision to allow “drive in,” “drive-through,” or “parking-lot” worship” is best determined by the leaders of various religious institutions, who know their congregants best. We support those leaders that want to use drive-in worship and we support those leaders that decide against drive-in worship in favor of streaming or some other virtual solution that provides acceptable social distancing. It must be noted that having a service in the parking lot of a place of worship while remaining in a vehicle only works when people stay in their vehicles and do not interact with others while on the property of the place of worship. In addition, faith leaders must consider all necessary preparations for this type of innovative worship to be safe for all participants.

Therefore, as a result of the risk involved to public health, faith communities are encouraged to conduct all services using electronic or virtual communication, to include incorporating on-line or mail-in donations, video streaming of faith leaders and congregants from home, weekly meetings held using video or telephone conferencing, and strict adherence to appropriate social distancing for those faith communities who are serving as sites for care of the public during the pandemic.



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**What is drive-through worship? What about drive-in church?**

Drive-in Worship service - people remaining in their cars in the parking lot of the place of worship to hear a religious message or some type of religious ceremony.

Drive-through Worship service - a religious official standing outside of a place of worship and offering confession, offering blessings or holy sacraments, or collecting financial donations etc. to people who remain their cars, in a procession of cars.

**Additional Helpful Guidelines for Drive up Services** - Attendees may travel to their place of worship, park in the parking lot and listen to the religious message while remaining in their vehicles. Participants must remain in their vehicle at all times, except as necessary to visit a restroom. Faith leaders are responsible for creating a plan for participants that must use the restroom, while maintaining the 10-person or less limit and social distancing. There must be no more than 10 individuals leading the religious ceremony or functioning outside of the place of worship in support of the religious ceremony. Any interaction by the faith leaders and those in the vehicles must be strictly limited, such as using social distancing methods when passing out palms, serving sealed or self-contained elements, and religious officials directing congregants to place ashes, oil, or water on their own forehead as opposed to religious officials applying those elements directly on the foreheads of the congregants. Any objects used for collecting monetary offerings should not be passed from attendee to attendee but may be offered to attendees in a vehicle as long as the object stays in the possession of the person assisting with collection. All appropriate measures should be taken for the safety of those functioning outside of the cars. Faith communities should also adhere to any noise ordinances.

Places of worship that conduct in-person services must limit gatherings to no more than 10 people, to comply with the statewide 10-person ban. Congregants sitting in their parked vehicles in the parking lot with adequate social distancing is allowed, as long as everyone remains in their vehicle. Windows may be rolled up or rolled down. Any gathering for a drive in/through worship service where faith leaders assemble on a stage or in the front of the parked vehicles must be limited to no more than 10 people.

**Many religious holidays in the spring require community involvement or engagement. What about community celebrations?** – While many upcoming holidays and rituals have been traditionally celebrated with in-person fellowships and prayer gatherings, the current conditions do not support these traditional observances. So, all community fellowships and gatherings must be held virtually or within the 10 or less person limit per EO 55. Faith leaders are permitted to go to the homes of their congregants but there must be appropriate hand washing, coughing and sneezing hygiene, social and physical distancing and the number of people in the home must not exceed 10.

**I am very concerned about how the COVID-19 crisis will impact my community being able to perform funerals. What about funerals?** – We acknowledge that this public health crisis creates great challenges for those families mourning the



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loss of a loved one and those who support those families, such as faith leaders and funeral homes. Given the wide variety in burial rituals across all the religious beliefs, we must underscore the need to protect public health. Therefore, consider alternatives for burial preparation that might include substitute ceremonial bathing rituals, funeral and graveside services that comply with the no more than 10 person mandate but include alternative forms of participation, such as online video streaming or participation where only 10 people at a time pay their respects in a rotating fashion.

**Am I at risk if I go to a funeral of someone who died of COVID-19?**

There is currently no known risk associated with being in the same room at a funeral or visitation service with the body of someone who died of COVID-19. People attending the funeral and/or visitation service should remain at least 6 feet apart from one another. Regardless of the number of people attending, everyone should also practice good hand, cough, and sneeze hygiene. Because we do not know all the ways the SARS-CoV-2 virus can be spread, older adults ( $\geq 65$  years) and people who have immune compromising conditions are recommended not to attend. Consideration can be given to livestreaming the funeral or visitation service so that others may participate remotely or video recording the events.

**Am I at risk if I touch someone who has died of COVID-19?**

COVID-19 is a new disease and **we are still learning how it spreads**. People should consider not touching the body of someone who has died of COVID-19.

**What do funeral home workers need to know about handling decedents from COVID-19?**

A funeral or visitation service can be held for a person who has died of COVID-19. Funeral home workers should follow their routine infection prevention and control precautions when handling a decedent who died of COVID-19. If it is necessary to transfer a body to a bag, follow Standard Precautions, including additional personal protective equipment (PPE) if splashing of fluids is expected. For transporting a body after the body has been bagged, disinfect the outside of the bag with a product with EPA-approved emerging viral pathogens claims are expected to be effective against COVID-19 based on data for harder to kill viruses. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for all cleaning and disinfection products (e.g., concentration, application method and contact time, etc.). Wear disposable nitrile gloves when handling the body bag. Decedents with COVID-19 can be buried or cremated, but check for any additional state and local requirements that may dictate the handling and disposition of the remains of individuals who have died of certain infectious diseases.

More information about funerals can be found at:

[The National Funeral Directors Association](#)  
[CDC's website about COVID-19 and Funerals](#)



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**My place of worship employs several people who are out of a job because we have to close our doors. Are our staff eligible for unemployment benefits?**

Because of the COVID-19 crisis, many people have suffered unexpected job loss. Governor Northam has asked that everyone apply for unemployment benefits, who have become unemployed due to this crisis. As of Monday April 6, 2020, those who have suffered job loss from a place of worship are now officially eligible for unemployment benefits.

**My place of worship will not survive the economic crisis the COVID-19 crisis has created. What help is there for faith leaders?**

There are mechanisms for help for faith communities. First, on March 20, 2020, the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) approved an SBA disaster declaration for the Commonwealth of Virginia. The disaster declaration allows SBA to provide assistance to Virginia businesses and nonprofits negatively impacted by COVID-19. For more information, you can visit- <https://www.sba.gov/funding-programs/disaster-assistance>

<https://www.sba.gov/funding-programs/loans/paycheck-protection-program>

Secondly, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act is a \$2 trillion relief bill. The 800-plus page document contains thousands of provisions covering virtually every part of the American economy, including faith and non-profit organizations. The CARES Act provides one-time cash payments to individual and families. The CARES Act also provides assistance to businesses and places of worship under certain circumstances. Virginia businesses and nonprofits impacted by COVID-19 can make applications to the SBA for the Economic Injury Disaster Loan program (EIDL) at <https://covid19relief.sba.gov/#/>

You can also contact the [Virginia Department of Small Business and Supplier Diversity](#) for specific questions.

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This document was created with information from the Virginia Department of Health, the National Funeral Directors Association, and the Center for Disease Control. Financial information was summarized from the Virginia Department of Small Business and Supplier Diversity.