

Guidelines on Re-Gathering for Worship
The Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia
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These guidelines have been developed by The Rt. Rev. Susan Haynes in consultation with medical, mental health, and legal professionals, clergy, musicians, and formation specialists including: The Rev. Jennifer Andrews-Weckerly, The Rev. Phil Bjornberg, The Rev. Robert Coniglio—PA-C, Ms. Beckie Davy—Director of Music at Bruton Parish Church, The Very Rev. Keith Emerson, Canon Lynn Farlin—Canon for Formation, The Rev. Canon Roy Hoffman—Canon to the Bishop, Ms. Jennifer Gallagher Jones—NP-C, Mr. Ed Kellam—Risk Management Advisor, Ware Insurance, Mr. Michael Kellam—Business Insurance Specialist, Ware Insurance, Ms. Vicky Koch—Director of Christian Formation, Mr. Kevin Kwan—Director of Music at Christ & St. Luke, Ms. Nancy Henderson Lemis—RN and District Epidemiologist for Peninsula Health Department, The Rev. Tom Martin, The Very Rev. Nancy Meck, Mr. Don Morris, Esq., The Rev. Michael Stone, The Rev. Robin Teasley, Dr. Mac Todd—MD, The Rev. Canon Ed Tracy—Canon for Administration, Ms. Harriet Vincent—FNP-BC, NP-C, and Ms. Jennifer White, RN, with special appreciation to Monique Foster, MD, MPH, The Rev. Win Lewis, The Very Rev. John Rohrs, and Diocesan Chancellor Sam Webster and Vice Chancellor Tim Coyle for their careful review of the guidelines.

***“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.
For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost,
to see whether he has enough to complete it?
Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish,
all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying,
‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’
Or what king, going out to wage war against another king,
will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand
to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?
If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away,
he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.” (Luke 14:27-32)***

Dear beloved family in Christ,

At the end of our Diocesan Council in February, I issued the invitation for you to put on your running shoes and run with me to be the Church in Southern Virginia – living out our Baptismal promises in new, exciting ways. As it turned out, two weeks later we found ourselves having to vacate our church buildings to stay in our homes to protect ourselves from a contagious disease that was sweeping the world.

After weeks of sheltering in place during the coronavirus pandemic, we have come to a new turning point in our journey of exile. Governor Northam has begun the process of loosening restrictions in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia is cautiously considering what will be necessary for us to do in order to re-gather physically and safely as the Church. Notice that I did not say that we are re-opening churches, because all of you during this “stay-at-home” phase have made it clear that the Church never closed. Across the Diocese, you exercised your commitment and enthusiasm to “continue in the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers” in new, creative ways that kept your communities connected and vibrant. I am grateful for all of your efforts and proud to be your Bishop.

It is now appropriate to begin to focus our attention on the possibility of *preparing to re-gather*, with particular attention to when and how we may safely re-gather *in person in our church buildings* and how we can plan to assemble in community in ways that keep everyone safe and constrain the spread of the virus. For the past few weeks, I have been working with a team of professionals including clergy, Christian formation directors, church musicians, doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, lawyers, and insurance specialists in order to develop a set of guidelines and expectations for parishes. Their consultation and insights have proven to be invaluable. The guidelines set forth in this document will enable parishes to determine individually if they have the resources and readiness safely to open their buildings.

What you will notice from the beginning is that church will not be like what you were experiencing prior to the pandemic. There is much that we have lost. It will be important for us to acknowledge that and to grieve it communally. For example, because of the vast concern about the spread of the virus through aerosols, we made the painful decision to suspend singing in church buildings for the foreseeable future. This will be a huge grief to all of us, and especially to church musicians. Other things will be missing at first also. We must learn to respect our grief about this and be gentle with each other. And we must continually remind each other that throughout this pandemic, God has been ever present with us and will continue to be present, working with us as we navigate our way to becoming the triumphant post-pandemic Church – one that proclaims Christ and His healing, saving power to the world.

Many will ask, “What date can we gather again for worship?” Once you receive these guidelines, your Vestry and Clergy will need to start the process of deciding if, when, and how they will re-gather for worship. Working together, Vestry and clergy may determine whether to open the building for re-gathering, and if they resolve to do so, will be expected to prepare and submit an application to the Diocese, outlining in letter form the manner in which the proposed plan will implement these guidelines. **No parish will be permitted to gather physically for worship without submitting this letter and receiving approval from the Diocese. Once the Diocese has approved the plan, the parish may take steps to re-gather for worship. However no plans will receive approval until the number of coronavirus cases statewide has declined for 14 consecutive days.**

Many of you may note that you live in areas of the Commonwealth that have not been so adversely affected by the pandemic and therefore might conclude that it would be safe for you to re-gather for worship even if the statewide numbers are not declining. However, because our society is so mobile, and travel from region to region is easily accomplished, regional declines might not be a good indicator of overall decline. Additionally, we have all noted the reports that this disease disproportionately attacks people of color, especially black people. Our Diocese has numerous African American congregations and particularly at churches of great historic significance which might be adversely affected. We will move safely as a united diocese, respecting the dignity and well-being of every human being.

Please know of my unceasing prayers for you. My staff and I stand ready to assist. We invite you to contact us to let us know how we can help.

Glory to God, whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever.

Yours faithfully in Christ,
+Susan

Words of Wisdom from the Presiding Bishop

“COVID-19 has left us disoriented, uncertain, and confused, afraid of what we know and anxious about what we do not know. Our old normal has been upended, and we hunger for its return.

I do not say this from a lofty perch. I get it. There is a big part of me that wants to go back to January 2020 when I had never heard of COVID-19, and when I only thought of “Contagion” as a movie. Looking back through what I know are glasses darkened by loss, I find myself remembering January 2020 as a “golden age.”

But of course, January 2020 wasn’t perfect, not even close. And anyway, I can’t go back. None of us can go back. We must move forward. But we don’t know for sure what the new normal will be. Fortunately, God’s rubric of love shows us the way.”

The Most Rev. Michael Curry

Preliminary Words of Caution:

When it becomes possible to re-gather for worship, no parish will be expected or required to participate if the leadership of the parish does not deem it to be safe or appropriate. Parish leaders and clergy are encouraged to enter into prayerful, open, and honest conversation to explore:

- Whether the entire Vestry concurs that, in their parish's specific context, it is safe and secure to begin in-person services. A unanimous vote is encouraged.
- Whether clergy serving the parish concur, in their specific context, that it is safe and secure to initiate services. No clergy person will be required or expected to conduct such services if he or she believes it unwise for the congregation or believes that he or she would undertake unacceptable risk in doing so.
- How to keep the parish and the broader community fully informed and connected.
- How to proceed at an appropriate pace to assure that safety remains paramount.
- How to assure that staff members have flexibility to work at home where feasible, particularly if returning to the church office would elevate risk for those who are vulnerable.

If parish leaders and clergy concur that re-gathering for worship is safe and appropriate, they are expected to prepare and submit to the Bishop's Office for approval a written plan to assure compliance with requirements established by the government, recommendations issued by health care professionals, and the standards set forth in this document.

The guiding principle given voice by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry bears repeating: *"what would love do?"* As you weigh the longing for what was, the reality of what is, and the responsibility of planning carefully what may be next, bear in mind that it may be better to move slowly so that present health data and advisories can be taken into account, that it will be important to remain prayerful and attentive to the guidance of the Spirit, and that together we can and will make our way through this, with God's help.

In the meantime, outreach services responsive to basic human needs of those in need in the broader community should continue, provided adequate safety precautions are observed.

Protocols for Re-gathering

Initial Order – Stay at Home: On March 12 as the number of COVID-19 cases began its rapid rise, Bishop Haynes suspended all church activities including worship in the Diocese. By Executive Order 53, Governor Northam prohibited all public and private gatherings of more than 10 people, stating *"this guidance is consistent with the expertise of public health officials and their models of continuing spread of COVID-19 throughout the Commonwealth and the nation. Unnecessary person-to-person contact increases the risk of transmission and*

community spread. Consequently we must limit such interactions.” The clear message: stay at home.

As detailed by the Bishop, this entails:

- *All church activities suspended including worship*
- *Church offices may open provided fewer than 10 are present, 6-foot social distancing, and thorough sanitizing is undertaken*
- *Where possible, virtual worship services developed*
- *Church meetings, Bible studies, and coffee hours conducted virtually*
- *Pastoral care extended virtually*
- *Funerals and baptisms postponed or conducted with 10 or fewer present and 6-foot social distancing*

Indicators meriting the loosening of restrictions:

- Decline in new cases statewide for 14 days
- Increase of testing capacity to acceptable levels
- Hospital capacity meeting demand
- Personal protective equipment available for health care providers in the community and members of the congregation

Counter-indicators include a local spike in cases, diminished regional hospital capacity due to increased demand, or similar developments.

Phase One – Safer at Home: Under phase one of the governor’s plan to initiate the re-launch of activities which the governor initially banned, “general guidelines for ‘safer at home’ include continued social distancing, continued teleworking, and continued recommendations for face coverings in public.” The governor’s directives, however, provide that places of worship are permitted to conduct drive-in services consistent with social distancing and indoor services at up to 50% capacity so long as health guidelines requiring a 6-foot social distancing radius are observed. The governor On May 26, the governor issued Executive Order 63 requiring that face masks covering the nose and mouth be worn in public spaces. Although the governor’s order allows face masks to be “removed to participate in a religious ritual,” the governor noted that “everything we do affects someone else. I’m asking us all to remember the golden rule: that we should treat each other the way that we want people to treat us.”

As the Commonwealth enters this phase, Bishop Haynes has convened the Re-Gathering Panel to formulate recommendations on whether and when specific church activities might resume and under what conditions. Based on input from the panel, conversations with the Presiding Bishop’s office and Bishops from other dioceses including The Rt. Rev. Susan Goff and The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Brooke-Davidson of the Diocese of Virginia and The Rt. Rev. Mark Bourlakas of the Diocese of Southwest Virginia, the Rt. Rev. Michie Klussmeyer of the Diocese of West Virginia,

the Rt. Rev. Eugene Sutton of the Diocese of Maryland, and the Rt. Rev. Marian Budde of the Diocese of Washington (DC), and collaborative review of emerging policies developed for this new phase, this document outlines the expectations which congregations desiring to begin re-gathering must satisfy:

- Develop and submit to the Bishop's Office for approval a written plan detailing the particular activities that will resume and the specific protocols to be followed. **Approval of this plan by the Bishop is required before any resumption of activity begins.** Plans will be reviewed upon receipt, though no plan for public gatherings will be approved until a 14-day decline in the number of coronavirus cases in Virginia is documented.

Each congregation's plan will be specific to its context but should address the following:

- Coordination – designate a health coordinator or health equity team responsible for planning and execution of best practices and compliance with current guidelines and protocols, including:
 - o Assuring that safety is paramount
 - o Obtaining adequate cleaning and sanitization supplies
 - o Acquiring an adequate supply of masks (and gloves, if indicated)
 - o Coordinating the use of best practices and the observance of established guidelines to include the latest regional and local case activity as reported by the Virginia Department of Health at: <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/>
 - o Reviewing CDC guidance for communities of faith posted with periodic updates at: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/faith-based.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fphp%2Ffaith-based.html
- Church office re-opening – establish practices to assure 6-foot social distancing at all times, thorough cleaning and sanitization daily, and requirements regarding the wearing of masks by any who occupy the same work space. Establish guidelines to permit staff who may be vulnerable to work from home, if feasible.
- Re-gathering for worship – detail practices to mitigate the risk of contagion, including:
 - o Assuring 6-foot social distancing (36 square feet per person or family). This will most likely limit the number of worshipers allowed in the building at one time.
 - o Establishing, where possible, patterns for the directional flow of participants entering, exiting, or moving about in the worship space to assure that social distancing is maintained to the full extent possible, and where possible, establish separate doors for entry and exit.
 - o Removing all Prayer Books, Hymnals, and Bibles from the pews. Additionally, pew cushions and portable cloth kneelers should be removed temporarily.
 - o Encouraging worshipers to bring personal Prayer Books from home, if available
 - o Discontinuing use of the holy water font

- Establishing hand sanitizer stations and, where possible, hand washing stations near entrances and exits
- Suspending the use of alms basins and providing a touch-free method for the collection of offerings
- Postponing congregational and choral singing for in-person worship. A small number of instrumental musicians, not to include woodwinds and brass, is permissible, provided 6-foot social distancing is maintained. Use of singers during Phase One is permissible only for live-streaming and recording for use in virtual services and only so long as social distancing protocols are followed and fresh air ventilation is employed.
- Discontinuing the physical passing of the peace
- Requiring, in accordance with the order of the governor, that all worship participants wear face masks covering the nose and mouth. Masks may be removed for specific aspects of worship (to read Scripture, to preach or address the congregation, or to receive communion, if offered).
- Developing a plan for dismissal of congregants in an orderly way that maintains social distance
- Planning for thorough cleaning and sanitizing of all public spaces before services and in-between services if multiple services are anticipated
- Considering, when possible, the use of outdoor spaces for services. Outdoor worship, where possible, limits use of enclosed spaces, thereby mitigating the risk of virus transmission. Even so, social distancing and the wearing of face masks are required at outdoor services.
- Recommending the wearing of gloves, if indicated, with appropriate instruction about proper wear and disposal of gloves
- Developing and implementing a plan to educate the congregation about expectations of all who attend public worship, practices which each participant must observe, and the differences worshipers will encounter as they re-gather, to include the wearing of masks, following of protocols, abstinence from singing or exchanging the peace, and the like. Additionally, this education plan must make clear that no one should seek to attend worship if they are feeling unwell or are experiencing any symptom or symptoms associated with COVID-19.
- Posting signage stating that no one with a fever or symptoms of COVID-19 or who has known exposure to COVID-19 in the prior 14 days is permitted to participate
- Posting signage regarding the mandatory observance of CDC and Virginia Department of Health public health standards including the wearing of face masks, 6-foot social distancing, and not attending if ill or symptomatic.
- Tracking the number of persons present in person or virtually for worship
- Recognizing that during Phase 1, the safest option for worship is either Morning or Evening Prayer or the Celebration of the Eucharist with the administration of spiritual communion, some congregations may include plans for the physical

distribution of communion. If so, communion **may** be distributed to worshippers provided the following guidelines are observed:

- The clergy in charge of each parish must determine whether distribution of Holy Communion is appropriate in the context of that parish. If the priest does not think the administration of Holy Communion is safe to do, then it shall not be distributed.
- If communion is distributed to members of the congregation, it may be distributed using individual sealed containers holding both host and wine such as are available at <https://wccups.com/our-products> or other providers. These individually sealed containers may rest on the altar during the Great Thanksgiving so as to be consecrated. **However, the paten and chalice should also be present on the altar throughout as a visible sign of our unity.** Only the priest may consume what is in the paten and chalice. The individual containers may then be distributed to the congregation. Following consumption, these individual containers may be dropped by communicants into a separate container to be removed to the Sacristy for ablutions.
- If communion is offered, it should be administered by having one communicant approach the altar at a time to assure adequate social distancing and appropriate attention to traffic flow.
- At such time as the governor lifts the requirement that “any items used to distribute food or beverages must be disposable and used only once and discarded,” congregations may opt for distribution of communion in one kind using individual hosts to be administered only by the priest, who must thoroughly wash his or her hands (and may, if desired, put on a fresh pair of surgical gloves immediately prior to the distribution), and not touch any other surface before administering each host. When communicating congregants in one kind, the host may be dropped into the waiting hands of each communicant or a small paten may be proffered from which the communicant will retrieve his or her own host.

Additionally, re-gathering plans must include the following:

- Continued suspension of in-person coffee hours
- Continued provision of virtual services
- Offering adult Christian formation by virtual means only
- Offering of children’s worship, Vacation Bible School, or other children’s programming by virtual means only
- Assuring that all nurseries remain closed
- Cancelling or postponing all mission trips, pilgrimages, etc.
- Addressing the needs and concerns of other groups seeking to use the facilities, including AA groups, Scouts, day schools, etc., as necessary and appropriate. Serious consideration should be given to limiting or eliminating availability of the church facility for use by such groups, but if the decision is made to permit

limited use of the building, outside groups should be required to observe the same standards employed by members of the congregation: wearing face masks at all times, maintaining 6-foot social distancing, not attending if ill or symptomatic, complying with all applicable CDC and Virginia Department of Health guidelines, and sanitizing any spaces used both before and after usage.

- Planning carefully to offer support services through existing food pantries and services to the homeless in a manner that safeguards the health of all and mitigates the risk of virus transmission.

Note: While the governor's office has authorized the resumption of worship subject to the limitation of 50% of capacity, minimum 6-foot social distancing is required at all times under the governor's directive, with the only exception being that members of the same family sitting together are not subject to the 6-foot distancing standard. Phase One guidelines state that seating should be marked in 6-foot increments in advance of services. If worship is conducted indoors, the number of people who can be accommodated with mandatory 6-foot social distancing is likely to be well below 50% of worship space capacity, and many churches may discover that 6-foot distancing can be accomplished only by using every third pew rather than every other pew. Careful measurement and planning is essential.

The governor's Phase One guidelines require that "any items used to distribute food or beverages must be disposable and used only once and discarded." As a consequence, the distribution of communion from the common paten and cup are not permitted during Phase One.

Per the governor's direction, "if any place of worship cannot adhere to (these) requirements, it must not conduct in person services."

- Revision or suspension – In the event of a local surge in cases or regional diminishment of health care capacity, congregations may need to revise or suspend plans for public gatherings on short notice. Local trends must be monitored weekly by the parish Health Coordinator or Health Equity Team to assure that decisions to revise or suspend worship plans are timely. Vestry and clergy should be prepared to convene on 24-hour's notice if changes in local health conditions warrant reconsideration of worship protocols or the suspension of worship, if necessary, in light of new information. Decisions to revise plans or suspend worship must be communicated to the Bishop the same day. The Bishop may suspend worship or gathering at any time if, in the Bishop's judgment, local changes in the number of cases, the number of deaths, the availability of essential health care, or similar developments warrant suspension.
- Baptisms, Funerals, Weddings, and Ordinations
 - Assure compliance with all standards set forth above for worship
 - Consider postponement to permit larger attendance at a later date

- At baptism, parents should hold the infant to be baptized throughout the rite, and after the priest blesses the water the parents shall pour it over the infant's head as the priest pronounces the words of baptism. Chrismation may be deferred until a later date, or if that is infeasible, administered by the priest using a cotton ball.
 - At baptisms, funerals, weddings, and ordinations, 6-foot social distancing must be maintained with the exception of immediate family members attending together and (of course) the bride and groom at a wedding ceremony. Clergy should avoid physical contact with participants and their guests
- Pastoral care – establish appropriate hygiene practices to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19, offering virtual pastoral care as the primary means of support

Phase Two – Safer at Home with Increased Flexibility

The parameters and limitations for Phase Two have not been established for the Commonwealth. Further guidance regarding the scope of church activity will be provided once further direction from the governor's office and health care professionals is issued.

Throughout the sequencing of all that follows, the Bishop will monitor reports on public health and the advice of public health professionals to assure that indicators for relaxing of limitations are being met, to include: the decline in new cases, the availability of adequate testing, the capacity of hospitals to meet demand, and the availability of personal protective equipment.

*“Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days,
for the living of these days.”* (from “God of grace and God of glory”)

Current guidelines providing minimal standards are accessible at the links below. Where the guidelines set forth above require more, the more stringent Diocesan standard establishes the requirements in the Diocese of Southern Virginia.

From the CDC:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/faith-based.html>

From the Office of the Governor of Virginia:

<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/governor-of-virginia/pdf/Virginia-Forward-Phase-One-Religious-Services-Guidelines.pdf>