



The
EPISCOPAL CHURCH *in*
CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

Returning to Our Buildings:
Guidance and Direction
for Worshipping Communities
in the Time of COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few months, many of you have returned to in-person worship while using the guidance provided in May to accomplish our paramount goal which was and is to maintain the safety of all members of the diocese while returning to more normal practices. We recognize that the restrictions placed upon how this worship is to be conducted have radically altered the space, the feeling of worship, patterns of interaction and time-honored traditions that we all hold dear. We have been heartened by your adherence to the guidelines and prohibitions that we developed. Not only were the plans that each of you developed well thought out, serious in nature and attentive to detail, many of you thoughtfully brought up issues that need to be addressed. Thank you for engaging faithfully in this important work.

The Diocesan Task Force for Operations recently reconvened to review the guidance it released last May and the issues several of you have raised in light of the growing body of applicable scientific research and the resultant changes in public policy. Based on a deeper understanding of the combined effects of droplet/aerosol density and duration of exposure on the risk of virus transmission, we found that while the guidance is still valid in most respects, there are several areas in need of some fine tuning.

REVISED GUIDANCE

Duration of Exposure

One of the factors not addressed in our May guidance was limiting the amount of time that people are in the same room together can reduce the spread of the coronavirus. Even when maintaining appropriate social distancing and mask wearing, the longer that you are in shared space, the higher the risk of virus transmission¹.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html>



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With that in mind, the following suggestions are offered for the shortening of service times. Rectors: please choose from among these suggestions to fit the needs of your congregation:

For services of Morning Prayer

- If desired, the service can begin with the Opening sentences and Invitatory on Page 42/80.
- The number of lessons can be reduced to one or two. (A lesson from the Gospel should always be included.)
- Reduce the number of psalms to be prayed if multiple psalms are appointed for the day.
- The number of Collects can be kept to the Collect of the Day and a Collect for Mission.
- Closing prayers of the General Thanksgiving *or* A Prayer of St. Chrysostom can be selected.
- The homily can be limited in its length.

For services of Holy Eucharist

- A service of “ante-communion” or the Liturgy of the Word can be used for those congregations that are not partaking in the sacrament.
- Lessons can be reduced to two. One must be the Gospel.
- The Sermon can be limited in its length.
- The Creed must be included on a Sunday.
- The intercessions can be one of the briefer forms, if desired.
- The Confession and Absolution should be included unless it is the Easter season.
- The Peace can be brief with the Offertory following immediately. Announcements can be printed in the bulletin.
- A eucharistic prayer may be selected based on brevity (probably not Prayer D...)
- Many of our congregations are finding the distribution of communion to be most expedient by distributing communion at the head of the aisle. If wine is desired (permissible in the Green plan) then a Eucharistic minister can pour individual cups as needed in a side chapel for those who desire wine.

All of this is to say, that there are places to shorten things up, but not in an effort to feel rushed or hurried. Silence is an important element of worship; creating space with moments of silence is important.



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Music Plus

One of the most persistent questions that has been raised concerns singing in church. Our May guidance advised against both choir and congregational singing but allowed for a soloist. Music is a gift from God, and singing is one of the most ancient and venerable components of our worship services. We want you to know that we have listened carefully to your concerns. We have consulted studies, spoken with experts, and spent time in prayer and reflection about this important topic. The truth is, there are competing and conflicting studies on the spread of Covid-19 and the dangers/safety of singing in groups. We are, however, convinced of the disconcerting fact that this virus is spread by moist breath. Several recent studies have found that forceful, sustained breathing, such as during singing and playing brass and wind instruments, appears to pose a greater danger of spreading the coronavirus than ordinary speaking at low volume.² One very recent study reported the relationship between the volume of singing, speaking or wind instruments and the amount of aerosols/droplets emitted.³

We recommend these practices to you as you plan, lead and participate in worship

- Maximize the use of public address systems at all appropriate times.
- Encourage congregational responses using soft voices.
- Continue to refrain from congregational and choral singing.
- Encourage the congregation to participate in music with body percussion such as clapping, tapping their thighs, and stomping.
- Refrain from unmitigated use of any musical instruments that require breath (wind instruments, brass instruments, anything into which one blows to produce sound). Mitigation techniques include placing a masklike cover over the discharge of the instrument, use a microphone to keep the instrument at a remote location, extend the social distancing of the instrument to 20 to 25 feet.
- Use all other instruments (keyboard, percussion, string). And consider distributing sanitized instruments to those in attendance.
- Avoid sharing instruments, and take care to disinfect instruments before and after use.
- Limit the size of ensembles both instrumental and choral (4 or fewer) and maintain a 6-foot distance between performers with face coverings on.
- Employ silence effectively.
- Keep up to date with ongoing research on the use of music during the pandemic.⁴

² <https://thehymnsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Resuming-Care-filled-Worship-and-Sacramental-Life.pdf>

³ Webinar, "Singing Where Do We Go From Here", DeClan Costello, Laryngologist and ENT Consultant, Frimley Health, NHS Foundation Trust, October 7, 2020

⁴ Here is a curated (and constantly updated) list of resources and updates about congregational singing and COVID-19: <https://thehymnsociety.org/covid-19/>.



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Again, we want you to know that we too miss congregational singing. We have heard your concerns and we took them seriously. Given what we know, and what we don't know, this task force is in agreement that this is a time for caution and conservatism. We will, however, continue to study this and other issues as more information becomes available.

Group Size during Liturgies

The May guidance included several provisions including temperature checks, records of attendance and use of masks, among others. In accordance with state guidance issued later in July, we limited group size to 25 persons (during liturgies this included chancel party, ushers and the congregation). All previous provisions remain in effect except group size. To better reflect the situations of each congregation, take full advantage of the spaces available to us; and based on feedback from across the diocese this guidance is changed as follows: Attendance will be limited by the ability to socially distance. A minimum of 6 feet must be maintained between each individual attendee or family group. This includes the chancel party, ushers, musicians, etc. As long as 6-foot separation can be maintained there is no numeric or percent capacity cap. Should any parish wish an independent review of its seating chart or other implementing instruction please contact the diocesan rep who assisted you during your reopening.

Extra-Liturgical Activities

While the basic group size guidance used during liturgies remains in effect for Extra-Liturgical events, some consideration must be given to the different character of these events. In most cases the movement and location of the attendees/participants is not as closely choreographed as they are during a liturgy. Some of these activities, coffee hours for example, are intended to facilitate interactions at less than acceptable social distancing. For these events parishes must consider modifying the design of the event or increasing social distancing intervals above the mandated minimum.

Since coffee hours are particularly problematic from this perspective the task force sought input from a physician who provided this opinion and advice:

Coffee hours are the high-risk events for Coronavirus spread due to:

- Masks off to eat or drink
- Parishioners being present for prolonged (more than 15 minutes) time
- Number of people present
- Physical distance



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Based on CDC recommendations, more specific language is needed:

- Having hand washing station or hand sanitizer and other cleaning supplies readily available
- Seating plan for attendees to be at least 6 feet apart
- Attendees wear face covering over nose and mouth when not eating or drinking
- When possible hold gatherings outside or in well ventilated large spaces
- Maintain a record of attendees
- Prepackaged servings that attendees can select without touching other pieces or be served by a person wearing mask and gloves using a utensil (spoon, tongs, fork)
- Beverages in sealed containers (water bottles, juice containers) or dispensed into a disposable cup by a person wearing mask and gloves

Based on this opinion and advice the task force strongly recommends against conducting indoor coffee hours and similar events. This recommendation is much stronger than the guidance in the May Guidance and Direction Document.⁵

CONCLUSION

The expertise and sensitivity with which parish leaders, both clergy and lay, resumed the use of our buildings for worship and other activities while exploring and implementing innovative new techniques is greatly appreciated. As is the forbearance of all members of the diocese as we all made the best of a difficult situation. These same qualities will continue to be important as we continue the journey towards more fully returning to our pre-pandemic practices. Although the Christmas celebration is a significant event on this journey these guidelines must remain in effect.

As noted in the opening paragraphs of this document, our overarching goal is a return to more normal practices while protecting the health and safety of all members of the diocese. The way to achieve that goal is to consider all our practices with a focus on minimizing the risk of virus transmission through a thoughtful consideration of the potential level of viral contamination in

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/food-pantries.html>

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/business-employers/bars-restaurants.html#anchor_1589927178249



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an environment and the length of time individuals are exposed to that environment. Keeping this in mind, if you have questions about any of the guidance set forth above or have recommendations for improvements or changes, please contact the diocesan staff member who reviewed your initial reopening plan. The Task Force will continue to study the both the original and amended guidance as more information becomes available.

Members

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Consulting Physician: Dr. Pamela Vnenchek