

Dear Friends,

We are living in extraordinary times. Society, as we previously knew it, no longer exists. Who could have predicted that we would worship online during Holy Week and Easter? Our daily lives are experiencing remarkable alterations. I am grateful for your leadership and willingness to be flexible in order to best serve your congregations and, thus, our greater community.

Our congregations have been gathering virtually since the middle of March but, at some point in the near future, we will have the opportunity to gather in-person. As we move towards re-gathering in-person, we will follow the orders of our civic leaders, health professionals and the re-gathering guidelines outlined below.

I will be in touch regarding when indoor worship can begin. If “stay at home” orders begin to relax and if you are comfortable convening your congregation and leading worship, the earliest your congregation will have permission to gather outside will be May 24th. You will need to register with the fire marshal before doing so. Instructions will be emailed.

A recent article in *The Atlantic* included this comment: “Everyone wants to know when this will end. That’s not the right question. The right question is: How do we continue?”

We will continue by listening to our leaders, loving our neighbors and praying for and serving our communities.

Please do not hesitate to be in touch if you have any questions.

You are all in my prayers.

Blessings,
+Morris

A GUIDE FOR RETURNING TO IN-PERSON WORSHIP

This guide is intended to facilitate the process of returning to worship in a manner in which we can safely gather together. It is meant to provide you with a collection of ideas to consider as your congregation moves towards re-gathering for public worship. **The most important messages we can deliver are that congregants must wear masks and church gatherings must keep family groups six or more feet apart at all times.** Remember, our goal is to live for our neighbors as though our behavior will save their lives.

Public Health Guidelines

Please keep abreast of federal, state and/or local recommendations and best practices that may apply to your congregation. Stay up to date on recommendations from the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana, as well. Guidelines may change as we learn more about this virus.

Continue Online Options

When federal and local recommendations allow in-person gathering, some people within our communities will be at higher risk and others will have appropriate concerns about gathering. Please continue the online worship practices you have developed in order to support those who are staying quarantined. Our goal is to care for one another through this epidemic with all the resources we can muster.

Worshipping Together

Deep clean your entire church, including: pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, stair railings, microphones and any areas people might be tempted to touch. Consider removing all non-essential items from rooms so that there are fewer surfaces to touch. Post signs that remind parishioners there will be no handshakes or hugs. Let your congregation know the steps that were taken to prepare for their gathering.

We ask that congregants bring their own masks and wear them at all times while on church property. The return to group worship in a confined space will need to include keeping at least six feet between all people who do not live in the same household. Please keep in mind that this means six feet laterally, as well as from front and back. A pew should be skipped in between people. You should dismiss your congregants in an orderly fashion that will allow for six feet of distancing. When permitted, indoor services should not exceed the use of 25% of your space, so as to facilitate safe distancing. You might want to create assigned seating with a percentage intended for visitors. Outdoor worship services should follow all safety rules provided by the fire marshal. The use of choirs is prohibited at this time.

A bow or wave is acceptable while passing the peace. A hug or handshake is not. No touching is permitted.

The offering plate should not be passed but placed somewhere that allows parishioners to contribute their offering. Online and automatic draft giving might be encouraged.

Fellowship hour will be appropriate while practicing social distancing. However, you should refrain from offering coffee or refreshments. We want parishioners to see one another and safely interact.

Our initial gatherings will use Morning Prayer only. We will follow this mode until health experts say it is appropriate to share in the Eucharist. I will announce when our congregations can begin to share in the Eucharist again.

Changing the Schedule and Location of Worship

As a result of the limitations on the number of people who can gather at one time and how much distancing is required for that number, your worship space may not safely accommodate all who wish to gather for a single liturgy. Adding additional services or moving worship outdoors or to a larger space, like a parish hall, may assist in keeping safe physical distance between worshippers. Your church may divide worship services, asking A-K to attend one service and L-Z the other.

Someone will need to keep a role of those in attendance at each service, so that if there is an outbreak they can be contacted.

Sanitizing the Church

In the event multiple services are held on the same day, appropriate sanitizing must be conducted between each service. All surfaces should be wiped down. If a church decides to hold only one gathering per week, wiping down hymnals and prayer books will not be necessary.

Service leaflets will not be provided at your church. However, electronic versions of service leaflets can be sent ahead of time. Congregants can print these leaflets and bring them to church or view them on a personal electronic device. You can encourage parishioners to bring and use personal prayer books but please remind them to take these books back home as they leave your service. If only one service is to take place within a seven-day period, books belonging to the church may be used. If more than one service takes place, it will be best to remove these books completely during this time.

Encourage Healthy Hygiene

Providing anti-bacterial dispensers at the entrance of the church and throughout the worship area will be helpful. Make sure ushers are comfortable instructing congregants about correct physical distancing and proper hygiene protocol, such as not shaking hands or hugging. While we will not encourage policing tactics, it is very important to ensure a safe environment. Encourage individuals under sixty years old with no pre-existing conditions to volunteer.

Nursery

There will be no childcare services for the time being. Also, note that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under two years of age should not wear masks or face coverings.

Revisit the Plan Regularly

After services, reflect with your church leadership as to what worked, what did not and what needs to change. We must remain nimble as we move forward. Guidelines from the CDC will continue to change and we must adapt. It is possible that after a congregation resumes gathering, a “stay at home” order may be re-issued for a community. If this happens, affected congregations will be asked to resume use of virtual worship practices until the order is lifted.