



## **STAGES FOR REOPENING CHURCH BUILDINGS FOR WORSHIP**

*To respond to and prepare for the next steps our life together, a team of individuals, including health care professionals, has helped draft these guidelines to assist you. This will take places in “stages” guided by directives from federal, state and local authorities and will roughly mirror the “phases” of a state’s movement. However, the special nature of our life together also means that we are guided by our gospel values and pastoral sensibilities. Therefore, how we move as a diocese may differ from what is outlined by governmental officials. We walk through all of these decisions carefully and deliberately, with the best interest and well-being of our clergy and congregations in mind.*

### **Protocol for Movement Through the Stages of Re-opening:**

The status quo will remain in effect until the governor of Louisiana issues Phase 2 directives. At that time, the bishop will direct churches to proceed with Stage 2 activities deemed appropriate by the national church and the diocesan office. All church activities must also follow local/parish/city rules and regulations.

Once the diocese has outlined allowable activities at a particular stage, the rector/priest-in-charge may decide to proceed more slowly because of the age and health status of the clergy and other worship leaders in that specific congregation.

As the governor’s office makes changes in the directives, the bishop will adjust allowable activities to conform with governmental guidance in consultation with national church best practices. At any stage, the bishop may decide not to allow practices that are sanctioned by governmental guidance. These decisions will be clearly conveyed to the clergy.

Any questions should be directed to the bishop or the canon to the ordinary.

### **Stage 1: Current Situation**

Church offices should remain closed to non-essential personnel; work, whenever possible, should take place from home.

If worship services are offered, congregations should continue to hold virtual worship via livestreaming, broadcast, and recording. When possible during video worship, participants should model mask wearing for the viewers. If livestreaming, no more than 10 people, including camera operator, may gather to conduct worship. Participants will maintain at least 6 ft of distance, and much greater distance for those who are singing, as discussed below. Congregational worship will not occur indoors.

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Congregational Eucharist will not be celebrated at this time.

Bible Studies, coffee hours, social gatherings, meetings and other small groups should meet virtually whenever possible. If the meeting does take place in person, the following guidelines must be met:

- \* When possible, meet outdoors, or indoors with open windows and/or doors.
- \* No more than 25% of capacity can be used in an indoor setting.
- \* All must wear masks. Masks with “exhalation valves” are not recommended.
- \* Maintain strict social distancing of at least 6 ft.
- \* No shared food or beverages.
- \* Sanitize all space before and after meetings.
- \* Maintain a record of all in attendance, including contact information.
- \* Funerals liturgies or burial offices will not be held. If the family requests and interment, no more than 10 people may attend. All must observe social distancing.

No live choirs or congregational singing is allowed. Recorded singing is preferred. If there is live singing, only one soloist is allowed to sing at a time, and each singer must be positioned at least 20ft from other singers or participants. See Appendix regarding singing during a pandemic.

Weddings should not be conducted at this time, except by permission of the bishop. If authorized, no more than 10 people may be in attendance.

Pastoral care should be conducted via telephone or online. All in-person pastoral visits are suspended at this time, except for end-of-life situations in healthcare facilities. The clergy must adhere to the rules, regulations, and safety protocols of that facility. Clergy who function in a hospital setting must abide by all hospital protocols. All clergy going to healthcare settings should closely monitor their health. If they develop typical COVID-19 symptoms (see below), they should self-isolate and contact their medical professional for further instructions. If exposed to a known or suspected COVID-19 patient, clergy should also closely monitor their health and self-quarantine for 14 days.

Congregations should continue ministries of presence and compassion, with a strong focus on reaching out to those most vulnerable.

Congregations should begin to assess the financial impact on communities, families and the local congregation.

Outdoor services may begin on Sunday, May 24. These must follow all guidelines established by the State Fire Marshal ([www.edola.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GUIDELINE-051320200923.pdf](http://www.edola.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GUIDELINE-051320200923.pdf)). All participants must wear masks. There will be no congregational singing. Readers/officiants may remove masks while speaking; however proper distancing must be maintained.

## Stage 2: Turning the Corner

The state will not enter Phase 2 until there are sustained declines in community COVID-19 cases, adequate testing capabilities and sufficient hospital capacity. Once the governor has declared movement to Phase 2, the bishop will consider approving churches to enter into Stage 2 of congregational life. It is likely that congregations will begin moving into Stage 2 at different times, dependent upon the unique circumstances in their communities. Again, a congregation may choose to move more slowly than is allowed by state government. The bishop may also restrict some activities allowed by state/local government.

In Stage 2, indoor worship will be assessed. Guidelines of distancing, capacity and other protocols will be distributed. However, to prepare for this stage, congregations should begin assessing their indoor worship space, including their HVAC systems (see appendix). Celebration of the Holy Eucharist with the congregation present will also be revisited at this time, with protocols to be distributed by the diocese.

Congregations must begin establishing local protocols on sanitation, distancing and group norms.

During Stage 2, in addition to any in-person services offered, congregations should continue virtual worship to minister to those who cannot or should not attend in person.

Moreover, outdoor services can continue during this time if they follow the Stage 1 protocols.

**To facilitate in contact tracing, a roster of all attendees (as well as contact information) must be kept for all gatherings.**

### Guidelines for Specific Diocesan Communities

#### *Churches of 50 Average Sunday Attendance or Smaller*

Some sanctuaries might be too small for in-person worship while maintaining physical distancing requirements. In these situations, congregations may need to worship in a different space large enough to provide for safe physical distancing (such as a parish hall or outdoors).

#### *Churches of 50 Average Sunday Attendance or Larger*

These congregations might wish to continue virtual worship until permission is given for gathering sizes that match their Average Sunday Attendance. All small group gatherings and worship services must adhere to safety guidelines. In addition, outdoor services are another option if Stage 1 protocols are followed

#### *Churches with Youth Programs*

As much as possible, programs should be carried out using virtual meeting formats. In-person meetings including vacation Bible school are not advised at this time. Neither are mission trips.

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### *Parish Schools and Day Schools*

All day camps and nurseries must abide by State Department of Education guidelines as well as any mandates by state, local or parish governments. Strict sanitation must be upheld to preserve the health of the congregation, the staff and the children. See guidelines from the State Department of Health ([www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/covid-19](http://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/covid-19))

### Process After Known or Suspected COVID-19 Exposure

It is possible that after a congregation resumes gathering, the congregation may become exposed to the COVID-19 virus. If this occurs, **the roster of attendees will be used for contact tracing purposes.** Those attending the affected events will be contacted about the exposure and asked to undertake a fourteen-day quarantine. In addition, the bishop or the congregational leadership may order suspension of in-person events and return to all virtual worship to protect vulnerable individuals.

### Re-instatement of “Stay at Home” Orders by Public Authorities

It is also 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.

## Stage 3: Stepping Into Recovery

*Date: To be determined*

Restrictions will be eased on office and classroom settings, but physical distancing guidelines will still be upheld.

Stage 3 will allow for more indoor, in-person worship with considerations for expanding liturgy and changing protocols for Sacraments including Holy Eucharist. However, the common cup will be prohibited beyond the celebrant.

Virtual worship should still be performed as an option. In-person pastoral care and other in-person meetings should be minimized as possible and done only if participants can practice strict adherence to physical distancing and probably masking.

Masking will probably still be required on church property or during church activities off campus.

Churches should consider pandemic impact on your communities. Plans should be adjusted based on available guidance and review of past experiences during Stages 1 and 2.

## Stage 4

*Date: To be determined*

We will plan to celebrate together!

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No limit of worshippers who may gather. However, continuing virtual ministry is advised and encouraged.

Widespread pastoral care is offered.

Emergency preparedness is in place. Congregations should take time to assess best practices in earlier stages to plan actions if pandemic conditions return.

## **Additional Resources and Guidelines:**

### **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 covering nose and mouth and that 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.

#### **Worshiping 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. In addition, post signs that clearly emphasize logistical accommodations to keep them safe as well as the rules on physical distancing and masking. For example, a bow or wave is acceptable while passing the peace. A hug or handshake is not.

Let your congregation know the steps that were taken to prepare for their gathering.

A list of all in attendance at any service must be kept so that, if there is a COVID-19 exposure at a church event, affected individuals can be identified and contacted. This should include visitors if possible. All exposed individuals should self-isolate for 14 days.

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Printed service leaflets should 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.

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 must include strict adherence to physical distancing (i.e. 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 family groups. 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 usage guidance allowed by state and local officials for 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 or congregational singing is prohibited at this time. A soloist may be used but only masked with 20+ft of distance.

The offering plate should not be passed but placed somewhere that allows parishioners to contribute their offering. Online and automatic draft giving can 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. Guidelines and protocols will be distributed.

### Encourage Healthy Hygiene

Providing alcohol hand rub dispensers at the entrance of the church and throughout the worship area would be helpful. Tissue dispensers should be distributed throughout the space to facilitate covering of coughs and sneezes.

### Ushers

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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

## Guidelines for Resuming Office Work

People will be required to wear fabric nonmedical facemasks while in the community to reduce their risk of asymptomatic spread.

Frequently touched surfaces will be required to be regularly sanitized.(i.e. shared desks, countertops, kitchen areas, electronics, doorknobs, etc...)

Employees who are considered to be “vulnerable” or to have “compromised immune systems” should continue to work from home.

Clergy should begin creating an emergency plan for another possible outbreak. If someone in your office<sup>[1]</sup> contracts COVID-19 you will need to closed and employees may need to be quarantined. The office then must be sanitized.

## Other Guidelines

People should bring their own masks. If they do not have a mask, churches should provide them for them.

Post signs regarding symptoms and urge people to stay home if sick.

Encourage vulnerable parishioners to stay home.

Do not use offering plates. Determine safer giving methods including online platforms. The diocesan office has provided resources on our website to help you get this started.

Drain all baptismal fonts.

Altar and flower guilds should maintain strict hygiene and distancing protocols.

## Pastoral Rites

### Baptisms

It is appropriate to delay baptisms until the community can gather freely. Special circumstances can be brought to the bishop for approval. Once baptisms are allowed, protocols will be distributed.

### Confirmation

No confirmations will be held at this time. Regional/Deanery gatherings will be planned at a later date.

### Parish Visitations by the Bishop

The bishop will be in touch with the congregations with whom he has scheduled parish visitations to determine how this can be accomplished safely and within the guidelines.

### Weddings

If possible, weddings should be delayed at this time. However, special permission may be granted by the bishop. Group size and location will be determined by the guidelines outlined by state and local officials. Those being married may stand together by the minister should maintain at least 15ft of distance, if not masked. If masked, only 6ft needs to be maintained. Consider pre-marriage counseling via video conferencing.

### Funerals

Graveside services are allowed with social distancing and size guidelines already laid out. Again, during Stage 1, funerals must be approved by the bishop.

All must wear masks.

Indoor funerals will be considered as part of in-person, inside worship guidelines.

## Other Suggestions

Provide hand sanitizing stations when possible.

Try to keep doors open, when possible. Good ventilation is critical in maintaining a safe environment.

Evaluate cleanliness of HVAC systems. Make sure lines are clear of stagnant water. Follow CDC guidelines to assure water quality.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/building-water-system.html>

Clean spaces regularly and develop plans for logging entrances.

<http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>

Human coronavirus can be detected on inanimate surfaces for up to 4 days. Although it is unknown how long the virus is infectious on surfaces, good environmental cleaning of frequently touched surfaces is a good practice. Identify those surfaces in your complex and have a cleaning plan with approved products for those surfaces. For example, surface disinfection with 0.1% sodium hypochlorite or 62-71% ethanol significantly reduces infection on surfaces with 1 min exposure time.

Consult CDC guidelines for cleaning surfaces.

<http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-buidling-facility.html>



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Considering limiting use of facilities by outside groups, when possible.

Keep strict attendance records for all worship and other meetings. Determine, in advance, who will be responsible for these lists as well as how to maintain a running roster for all church functions.

Made every effort to maintain these lists electronically for ease of reference.

If you become aware of someone in the church with COVID-19, put your communication plans into action and fully cooperate with contact tracers.

Communicate clearly expectations for in-person worship. Consider online education modules for member use.

Temperature checking at all gatherings is not necessary, but all attendees should be well educated in protocols.

Encourage collaboration with other groups and churches.

## Mask Use

Masks are to be used along with strict 6 feet of physical distancing and frequent handwashing.

Cotton cloth masks made of two to three layers of breathable cotton are preferred.

Commercial versions are available (i.e. CM Almy)

Tie masks securely in place to cover your nose and mouth with no gaps between your face and the fabric.

Wash cloth masks between every use.

Do not reuse paper masks.

Persons unable or unwilling to wear a mask must not enter church buildings.

## Other Resources

### Singing

We still do not know absolute distance that guarantees safety. Therefore, at this time, there will be no congregational singing. Research suggests that at least 26ft of distance may be necessary to ensure safety. A good resource on congregational singing can be found in a Webinar presented by NATS 5/2/20 "What do Science and Data Say about the New-Term Future of Singing. [www.nats.org](http://www.nats.org)

### Fire Marshall Guidelines

[www.edola.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GUIDELINE-051320200923.pdf](http://www.edola.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GUIDELINE-051320200923.pdf)

### OpenSafely

<https://opensafely.la.gov/>

### Department of Education Child Care Guidelines

[www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/covid-19](http://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/covid-19)

### Governor Edwards Guidelines

<https://gov.louisiana.gov/>

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**ASHRAE (HVAC)**

<http://www.ashrae.org/about/news/2020/ashrae-offers-covid-19-building-readiness-reopening-guidance>.

**National Association of Episcopal Schools**

<https://www.episcopalschools.org/news/covid-19-update/>

## **Our Gratitude**

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