



THE EPISCOPAL
DIOCESE OF OHIO

Phased Return to In-Person Parish Life for the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio

The Coronavirus continues to impact our communities across the world. As Episcopalians, we have a deep desire and call to care for our people, our communities, and each other through this pandemic. Our churches have responded to the abrupt end to public worship and community gatherings with creativity, goodwill, and compassion, but now we must continue to build on those qualities as we prepare ourselves for different stages of in-person gathering.

Our goals include:

- Offering hope to our communities in this uncertain time
- Continuing to provide our people and communities with the best pastoral care now and in the months to come
- Providing continuity of prayer and worship, whether gathered in person or electronically
- Protecting the most vulnerable by limiting contact and initiating practices to slow the spread of infectious disease

The following multi-phase plan contains practices for how Episcopalians in the Diocese of Ohio will undertake regathering after the resumption of in-person worship, taking into consideration further recommendations from health officials and Governor DeWine. It is possible that circumstances will dictate changes to the plan, including returning to an earlier phase. The bishop will announce all changes from one phase to another. A faithful balance of science and pastoral care will guide our actions.

The plan contains the following:

- **Phase 1:** Suspension of In-Person Worship
- **Phase 2:** Regathering in person
- **Phase 3:** Increasing Participation
- **Appendix A:** Questions for the Vestry, Clergy, and Staff
- **Appendix B:** Resources

These guidelines articulate practices that fall into categories of “requirements” and “recommendations.”

- Requirements are mandatory and are indicated by phrases like “*must...*” and “*...are prohibited*”.
- Recommendations, which are indicated by phrases like “*we advise,*” are best practices and may be modified as appropriate to your local context.

The authorization of a particular practice does not mean that it is required of any communicant, deacon, or priest. In the polity of The Episcopal Church, decisions about the worship are the responsibility of bishops and priests. It is important, however, that clergy and elected lay leaders provide unified leadership. If challenges in discernment arise, the Bishops and Diocesan staff are available to assist.

As we continue to follow guidelines for safety, please remember to pray for the ill and recovering, for the grieving, and for the lonely. We pray for researchers, medical professionals, health policy experts, front line workers, and for those who clean and stock and ship. And we pray for each other - that we may continue to be a people of hope in the midst of fear and uncertainty.

Complex, contextual, and pastoral decisions about your parish's particular adoption of these guidelines are best made in collaborative consultation between elected lay leaders and clergy. To that end, Appendix A includes a brief list of questions to be used, along with this full document, as a tool helpful to developing a plan.

Once your leadership has developed its plan, and prior to regathering, please complete the brief online summary and submit it [HERE](#). This summary is intended to assist in thorough planning and decision making by identifying areas where particular attention and support may be helpful. An outline of the summary form is also included in Appendix A. Please be encouraged to contact the Rev. Brad Purdom at bpurdom@dohio.org with questions.

Phase 1: Suspension of In-Person Worship

Parish Building and Office Use Guidelines

Consistent with Governor DeWine's Stay at Home Order, staff members who are able to work from home should do so.

In-building staffing must be minimal and on a drop-in basis as necessary to maintain essential operations (deposits, mail processing, etc.). Staff members must communicate to ensure that social distancing is always maintained. Common surfaces, including doorknobs, counter tops, and office electronics must be disinfected before use.

Worship & Formation

- All congregations shall suspend services of in-person worship. We recommend that congregations use online tools for worship, formation, and fellowship.
- Live-streaming from inside a church building is permitted, with a minimum number of participants.
- "Drive-through" and "drive in" worship is prohibited.
- "Virtual communion," in which a minister "blesses" bread and wine through a phone or online connection, is prohibited.

Recommendations for Staying Connected while Separated

We advise continuing to offer opportunities to gather your community while physically separated using tools like video conferencing and social media for ongoing worship, formation, and fellowship.

We advise identifying a method by which your leadership will continue to engage your non-online parishioners, whether by phone, with training and assistance to get access online, or some other means.

All pastoral care should be conducted by mail, telephone, and other technology.

Weddings: If it is necessary to celebrate Holy Matrimony, participants must be limited to ten, including the priest, the intendeds, and the two required witnesses. A subsequent celebration of the marriage may be held at a future date, if and when circumstances for such public worship allow, in the spirit of The Blessing of a Civil Marriage (BCP, p. 433).

Funerals: If interment is necessary, only a minimal number of immediate family (ten or fewer, including the priest) may be present for a graveside service, observing the current norms of distancing. A memorial celebration of life may be held at a future date, if and when circumstances for such public worship allow.

Service and Outreach

- Requirements for group size, physical distancing, sanitizing, and use of masks must be followed.
- Distribution ministries must limit volunteer time spent inside the building. Distributions may only take place outside or on a curb-side basis.

Summer Programming

Summer Camp: Bellwether Farm will not hold summer camp this year.

Vacation Bible Schools and Mission Trips: All in-person summer programming, including Vacation Bible Schools and Mission Trips, will not take place. While the risk to children may appear to be somewhat lower, there is an ongoing risk of carrying the virus back home and sharing with other family members. We advise providing an online or no-touch drop off of all activities to be done in the home.

Phase 2: Regathering In Person

Permission to gather in person does not imply that any congregation or individual communicant is expected to do so. Please remember that many of our congregations are composed of individuals who are particularly vulnerable. It may not be appropriate for some congregations and communicants to resume in-person gathering.

Prior to re-gathering in Phase II, every congregation must submit a summary of their plan as described above and included in Appendix A.

Preparing the Church Building for Regathering

Before any public use of our church-owned spaces, congregations must deep clean and appropriately disinfect the entire church building, including pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, stair railings, and microphones. Please see Appendix B for current cleaning guidelines from the CDC.

It is recommended that all non-essential items be removed from worship and meeting spaces so that there are fewer surfaces to touch. This includes Prayer Books, Hymnals, pew cards, etc.

Making announcements and posting signs about social distancing, hand washing, wearing of masks, non-contact greetings, and refraining from shaking hands, hugging, or any physical contact, are strongly advised.

Advise the congregation of all preparations made for their return and reiterate that if they do not feel well or are particularly vulnerable, they should stay home.

Building Use Guidelines

Office Guidelines

Staff members should be permitted to work from home as much as is practicable, especially those who are immunocompromised, parents of children, or older than 65.

We advise keeping in-office functions as minimal as possible.

Any staff members working from church-owned buildings must continue to follow social distancing and sanitizing guidelines, including:

- Maintaining six feet of separation between individuals
- Regular handwashing and sanitizer use
- Regular disinfection of common surfaces including doorknobs, countertops, and office electronics.
- Wearing face masks

Other Guidelines

Congregations must follow all physical distancing guidelines, including the use of masks. Please consider having a supply for those who arrive at your building without one.

Buildings must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.

Maintain appropriate stocks of bathroom tissue, soap, hand sanitizer, disinfectant, and disposable paper towels for drying hands.

Building users, such as 12-step groups, may be permitted use of the building at the discretion of the clergy in consultation with the vestry on the condition that they observe physical distancing and sanitizing protocols.

It is advisable to create an emergency plan in order to respond to additional outbreaks.

It is recommended and expected that congregations institute some contact tracing mechanism to assist the local health department in quickly tracing, testing, and isolating individuals who may have been exposed to COVID-19 in your building.

Worship Guidelines

Congregations may choose to offer in-person worship under these suggested guidelines:

- Maintain online worship and formation opportunities for those unable to join in-person gatherings
- Spread out the number of attendees in the building, which may require adding worship services
- Have people sign-up for services in advance while allowing space for visitors who may drop in
- Create and designate fixed seating to maintain safe distances
- Hold services outside

All common surfaces must be cleaned and disinfected before worship, including doorknobs, counter tops, pews, electronics, and sacramental items.

Requirements for Gathering Size:

- Limit events and meetings that require close contact. Most, if not all, meetings and formation opportunities should continue to take place online.
- Limit in-person worship gatherings to the maximum number for your space while allowing 6 feet of total separation between households. A rule of thumb to help you plan is 30% of the Fire Marshal's posted maximum allowed seating, but the 6 feet of separation is the requirement.

Requirements for Worship:

- Masks are required to be worn by everyone including the celebrant and preacher. Please consider having a supply for those who arrive at your building without them.
- Both Morning Prayer and Holy Eucharist are permitted liturgies for the principal service.
- It is impossible at this time to provide a safe method of distribution for consecrated elements in the celebration of Holy Eucharist. This is very much an ongoing conversation which we pray will lead us to new possibilities for safe distribution. Therefore, at this time only the celebrant may receive the consecrated elements on behalf of the congregation, while all others say a prayer for spiritual communion.
- Singing carries a very high risk of transmission of the coronavirus, and therefore is not permitted by congregation or choir.
- Live-streaming may continue from inside the church building while maintaining appropriate physical distancing with any participants.
- There may be no physical touching during the passing of the peace and no leaving the pew to acknowledge others. It is permissible to omit the exchange of the peace.

- There is no passing of an offering plate through the pews. Encourage worshippers to offer financial gifts online or to a stationary plate as they enter.
- Households may sit together and at least six feet apart (i.e., 360°) from any others.
- To avoid crowding and bottlenecks, there should be no receiving line following any service.
- At the discretion of clergy and vestry, a brief fellowship time without coffee or food and with proper social distancing may be held, preferably out of doors.

Recommendations for Worship:

- Worship services may be outlined using single-use bulletins, picked up rather than handed out, by sending a digital copy for people to access on their personal devices, or by use of screen and projection.
- Develop a plan for dismissing congregants in an orderly way to ensure social distancing as people exit.
- Ushers may be encouraged to remind those attending about safe practices and guidelines.
- Develop a plan to reduce the number of doors that people must touch to enter your service by employing doorstops.

Requirements for Special Services:

- Baptisms, weddings, and funerals may resume with participation limited as described above for Sunday worship.
- The only permitted breach of social distancing in Baptism is for chrismation, as required by rubric. Baptismal water can be sprinkled with an aspergillum or evergreen branch.

Service and Outreach:

- Requirements for group size, physical distancing, sanitization, and use of masks must be followed.
- We advise that distribution ministries limit time spent inside the building and allow for outside or curbside service.
- Any food distribution must be carry-out. Buffets are prohibited.

Phase 3: Increasing Participation

As with Phase I and Phase II, the initiation of Phase III will be determined by the Bishop.

Building Use Guidelines

Events and in-person gatherings are permitted. We advise making every provision to avoid crowding.

In-person meetings are permitted. Each congregation should consider how to enable high-risk members to participate online.

Regular office operations are permitted. We advise considering how you might maintain flexibility for staff members who are high-risk or have children unable to attend school or access childcare.

Communal spaces must continue to be cleaned on a regular basis, including before gatherings.

It is recommended that contact tracing be continued as in Phase II.

Worship Guidelines

Worship gatherings of all sizes are permitted with the following guidelines:

- We advise maintaining an online/hybrid worship option for people that are high-risk and needing to maintain stay-home precautions.
- Physical distancing is not required. We advise avoiding crowding in the sanctuary and other spaces to every extent possible. Consider offering multiple services to help people spread out.
- Congregations must continue the use of no-touch alternatives for the passing of the peace.
- Congregations must continue the use of no-touch alternatives for the offering.
- We advise setting aside special space within your worship area to be designated for people of vulnerable populations.

Reception of the Sacrament by all is permitted with the following guidelines:

- Clergy must wash their hands with soap and water before services and use hand sanitizer visibly before distributing communion. All clergy persons and parishioners who feel sick or have any symptoms, must remain at home.
- Until further notice, only the celebrant is permitted to receive the consecrated wine. It is important to instruct that receiving the Sacrament in one kind constitutes full participation in the Eucharist (Doctrine of Concomitance).

Coffee hours are permitted with the following guidelines:

- Congregations must make every provision to ensure adequate space to avoid crowding.
- A gloved person must distribute any food or drink. Buffets and self-service are not permitted.

The Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr., Bishop, Ohio

This plan was compiled in conversation with the bishops, staffs, and elected leadership of the Episcopal Dioceses in the state of Ohio, following current recommendations of the CDC, and with resources offered from the four Dioceses in Michigan, all 14 Dioceses of Province V, the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, the Dioceses of Northwestern Pennsylvania and Western New York, the Dioceses of Washington, Maryland, and Virginia, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, and the Office of the Presiding Bishop.

Appendix A: Questions for consideration by the Vestry, Clergy, and Parish Staff

Effective leadership in anxious times is best accomplished through collaborative decision making. Please use this list of questions as a starting place for your clergy, vestry, and parish staff to develop a consensus plan when moving from one Phase to another.

- How will you maintain connection with those who cannot gather in person, even when restrictions are lifted?
- How many people can your worship space safely accommodate if you are worshipping with household groups sitting six feet apart?
- How will you manage safe congregating after worship services?
- How will you continue to be inviting and open to people who are not yet part of your community?
- What is your plan for sanitizing and disinfecting your communal spaces?
- How might your building use agreements need to be updated to reflect the new realities revealed by the pandemic?
- How will you maintain necessary stewardship practices to support operations while the congregation, or part of it, is dispersed?
- What assets do you have (space, yard, volunteers) that might be used to respond in service to your community in light of the pandemic?
- If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual, while respecting privacy and pastoral concerns?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you conduct an intensive cleaning prior to its next use, as outlined by the CDC? (see Appendix B)
- How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?

Phase 2 Regathering Report

This summary is intended to assist in thorough planning and decision making by identifying areas where particular attention and support may be helpful. This is for reference only. The form should be submitted [here](#). Please be encouraged to contact the Rev. Brad Purdom at bpurdom@dohio.org with questions.

Parish Name _____
Person Reporting Name _____

Parish City _____
Email _____

1. Have your clergy and vestry met and developed a plan using the Phased Return Guidelines? Y/N
2. How will you communicate your safety plan to the congregation?

Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility

3. How will you handle the initial cleaning and disinfecting of your building prior to reopening it?
4. Please summarize briefly your ongoing plan for maintaining a clean and disinfected facility?
5. How do you plan to maintain a stock of cleaning supplies, hand sanitizers, disinfectants, etc.?
6. Do you have any questions or concerns about maintaining a clean and disinfected facility throughout Phase 2?

Maintaining Social Distancing

7. What is 30% of the maximum seating in your sanctuary according to the Fire Marshal? ____
8. What is your estimate of the number of people who can sit in your sanctuary while maintaining 360-degree, six-foot physical distancing? _____
9. What will be your approach with people who refuse to comply with wearing a mask or other physical distance protocols?
10. Have you considered reserving space in worship for visitors? (Y/N)
11. What questions or concerns do you have about maintaining social distancing during Phase 2?

Returning to the Parish Office

12. Please summarize briefly your expected use of the parish office during Phase 2.
13. What questions or concerns do you have about using your parish's office?

Online Worship, Formation, Fellowship

14. How will you continue to offer online worship, formation, and/or fellowship for members of your parish unable to gather in person during Phase 2?

Outreach and Outside Group Building Usage

15. What questions and concerns do you have about building use by outside groups and for outreach during Phase 2?

Other Ideas, Questions, Concerns

16. How can your mission areas and/or the diocesan staff best support your parish with these or similar issues?
17. What other ideas, questions, or concerns do you have?

Appendix B: Resources

[Centers for Disease Control](#) - vast resource for COVID-19 precautions and suggestions

- [Cleaning your Facility](#) – CDC guide for cleaning and disinfecting your facility
- [Sanitizing Office Spaces](#) – CDC guide for facilities with suspected/confirmed case of COVID19
- [Preparedness for Sacred Spaces](#) – CDC guidance for community and faith-based institutions

[State of Ohio](#) – Ohio Dept of Health main page

- [Find your local Health District – locator](#)
- [Responsible RestartOhio – protocols and information](#)
- [Public Health Orders](#)