

Guidance for Churches Entering Phase II

"I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." -Joshua 1:9

This document was developed with consultation and input from the wider Episcopal Church; the CDC, as well as local medical experts; other Episcopal Dioceses; other Denominations; and in consultation with the Diocesan Council and the Standing Committee, who affirmed these guidelines on May 14, 2020.

Gathering together in-person as a worship community is a vital part of our faith lives. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also carries great risks. Being in enclosed spaces with a large group of people; singing, talking, and sharing hugs and handshakes; consuming food and drink while in contact with others; touching common surfaces such as door handles and prayer books; these are all examples of high-risk circumstances and behaviors that we must develop plans to guard against so that we can gather together as safely as possible.

Though your county may transition into the Yellow Phase by order of the Governor, **the gradual reopening of our congregations will depend on whether church leaders feel that they are ready and have strong protocols in place for ensuring the well-being and safety of all parishioners**, which may be anytime after your county has received the Yellow designation. This document provides best practices as well as questions to help guide your planning process. Additionally, regional Zoom calls (utilizing our new Convocation structure) will begin May 26th to assist you in this effort. All clergy and Senior Wardens serving a parish, as well as one additional person from each parish, are invited to attend.

The following are best practices to keep your community, especially the most vulnerable, safe and healthy while gathering in-person. Keep in mind that these best practices also apply to outside organizations that use your church space.

- **The Eucharist is strongly discouraged at this time.** Increasingly, the advice of health experts points to concern over whether the Eucharist can be celebrated safely. Consuming the Eucharist requires lowering/touching masks, which can lead to spreading or being exposed to the virus. Morning or Evening prayer is recommended.
- **Congregational or choir singing is strongly discouraged at this time.** Evidence shows that singing is more likely to spread the virus than speaking. A Cantor/Soloist may be considered if they are wearing a facial covering at all times, with physical distancing in place. Instrumental music is recommended.
- In-person gatherings must be limited to **25 people**, per the Governor's orders, and must be held in spaces large enough for proper physical distancing. Please note that outdoor gatherings may be safer than indoor gatherings at this time—it can allow for more space for physical distancing, and avoids the issue of breathing recirculated air, which can increase the risk of catching the virus.
 - A plan to ensure that no more than **25 people** attend each in-person gathering, as well as a pastoral response to handle any visitors, should be developed.
 - A log of who attends each in-person gathering should be kept for the purpose of contact tracing.
 - All in attendance must maintain 6 feet distance from other people **at all times**. Members of a household may sit together, but must maintain 6 feet distance from others.
 - Designate one entrance to the building and one exit to avoid crowding and facilitate physical distancing at all times
- All in attendance must wear masks **at all times** (teach proper protocols—[See CDC guidelines](#)). A supply of masks should be available to hand out if needed.

Gatherings of up to 250 are permitted in the green phase if all other guidelines in this document (including physical distancing) can be maintained

- Designated individuals (e.g. ushers, etc.) should be identified and trained to help ensure parishioners and visitors adhere to all parish protocols during in-person gatherings.
- Proper cleaning and sanitizing protocol should be followed in meeting spaces ([See CDC guidelines](#)). Sanitizer and disinfecting wipes must be available for use. Churches should consider the extra costs associated with these measures.
- Books of Common Prayer and hymnals can act as vectors to spread the virus—they should be removed and alternative options such as single-use bulletins or screens must be used.
- On-line worship offerings should be instituted or continued.

We recommend your church leadership consider the following questions as you create your plan to hold in-person worship safely:

1. How will you prepare your facility and your congregation for reopening?
 - a. Where will you meet?
 - b. Who will help reinforce your guidelines when you gather?
2. How will you communicate your policies to your parishioners and potential visitors prior to and throughout the process of reopening?
3. What alternatives will you provide for parishioners who cannot or choose not to attend in person?
4. How will you keep your facilities clean and encourage appropriate hygiene practices?
5. How will you manage the numbers in attendance so that physical distance can be maintained?
6. How will you assist congregants to maintain physical distancing and in other ways reduce the risk of spreading the virus?
 - a. How will you continue to accept pledges? (Plates should not be passed at this time).
7. How will you apply your policies to parish activities other than public worship and to outside groups that use your building?

Once your leadership has developed a plan for re-gathering, please [contact Sandy Milien](#) to schedule a meeting to consult with Bishop Kevin.

"O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass all understanding: pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you and all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."
-Collect for the Sixth Sunday of Easter