

PHASE 1 RE-GATHERING PLAN DATED 06/17/20

THESE PROVISIONS SHALL BECOME EFFECTIVE ASSUMING SATISFACTORY PUBLIC HEALTH CONDITIONS BY THE BISHOP IN CONSULTATION WITH SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS, AND IN NO EVENT PRIOR TO JULY 5, 2020. SHOULD CONDITIONS CHANGE BEFORE OR AFTER THAT TIME, THE BISHOP RESERVES THE RIGHT TO FURTHER RESTRICT OR PROHIBIT IN-PERSON GATHERINGS.



Guidance for Church Physical In-Person Gathering and Building Use with respect to COVID-19 (the “Guidance”)

Sisters and Brothers,

The COVID-19 Task Force has been studying the complex issues affecting our 117 worshipping communities, including parishes, schools, and direct service ministries in 75 1/2 counties in middle and north Georgia. **The Bishop’s office is monitoring the public health conditions in our diocesan area and will inform us when this Guidance may be implemented, revised, or revoked.** You will want to monitor your local public health conditions in order to implement this Guidance only to the extent appropriate for your situation.

We agree the benefits of in-person gatherings are real and robust. We recognize the work of welcoming, caring, advocating, reconciling, praising, and loving as God loves us finds particular energy in face-to-face fellowship. However, we also recognize the real risks associated with in-person gatherings are elevated given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These risks are serious and complicate our perception of what true hospitality will look like in 2020 and beyond.

Online is not only the safest space for us to gather but the way for us to reach the broadest range of people at this time. We strongly encourage online worship, formation, and fellowship to continue and to expand even if physical in-person gatherings are added.

The COVID-19 Task Force's goal is to analyze, on an ongoing basis, the risks associated with in-person gatherings while also recognizing the specific and valuable benefits of in-person meetings of our Diocesan communities and to develop minimum standards and guidelines based on the most recent and relevant data. We are using a data-driven approach to develop an understanding of the risks, the relative levels of these risks, and the risk trends evident in our respective communities, including ongoing review of guidance from public health authorities. As risk data changes, so may the minimum standards and additional guidelines as recommended by the COVID-19 Task Force.

All exceptional services, such as baptism, funerals, and weddings, will continue to be at the Bishop's discretion. Please contact the Bishop's office to discuss specific needs.

In keeping with the gift of faith and our shared Diocesan values, our driving directive is love of neighbor. As such, we recognize the recommended minimum standards and additional guidelines may exceed secular directives. Our data-driven approach is meant to support Diocesan communities by providing a set of minimum standards to meet and a maximum number of people as well as guidelines to be implemented **if and only if** a Diocesan community has discerned that the inherent public health and faith-based risks due to specific risk indicators (e.g. relative age of community members, facility restrictions, etc.) are outweighed by the perceived development of the faith community in its spiritual health and purpose. **No Diocesan community is required to offer physical in-person gatherings, in or outside of church buildings. Even if the current COVID-19 Guidance permits larger gathering sizes, you may always choose protocols that are more restrictive or maintain online-only.**

If a worshipping community chooses to offer physical in-person gatherings, whether inside or outside of church buildings, then the minimum standards and maximum numbers DATED outlined on the current Safer Standards Chart must be

followed. Flexibility is indicated where possible, but the minimum standards and maximum numbers are otherwise to be considered mandatory. In order to proceed with physical in-person gatherings:

- The parish must develop detailed plans for such gatherings per this Guidance and such plans must be approved by the vestry; and
- Such parish must notify the Bishop's office, in advance of their intent to implement such plans and [submit a Certification](#) in advance that they have a plan that complies with the current Guidance; such certification shall be updated in the event the Guidance is substantially revised.

At this time, all offerings by a parish or worshipping community of physical in-person gatherings must be conducted on church property unless an alternative is approved by the Bishop's office. This includes bible studies and social gatherings that are offered as parish activities. No third parties should be hosting official parish activities.

Finally. As you all know from the tremendous expressions of church and of your own hope in Christ that you have been offering online, by phone and text, through masks and gloves, **the church does not need to return from anyplace. The church has been present throughout, as it has in all conditions for millennia.** We look forward to being able to gather again and to use our spaces freely. Until this time, we can encourage one another in discipline, creativity, invitation and dignity in our Episcopal practice.

What follows is public-health-centered guidance for shaping physical in-person gatherings and building use and reflection invitations for clergy and lay church leadership to explore and return to throughout this extended season of our relationship with COVID-19. What works one week might not work the next. Just because we can take certain actions does not mean we have to. What can we design and redesign that is science-supported and life-giving?

The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other. The church pursues its purpose through prayer and worship, proclaiming the gospel, and

promoting justice, peace, and love. The church completes its purpose through the ministry of all its members. (BCP, p. 855)

We challenge ourselves and the world to love like Jesus as we worship joyfully, serve compassionately, and grow spiritually.”- Diocese of Atlanta purpose statement, adopted 2015

I. Initial (and Ongoing) Work

1. Identify the Leaders.

Whether our people gather physically in person or not, we may benefit from leaders in new or expanded roles to assist with messaging, logistics, formation, and modeling prayerful and compassionate response to an ongoing pandemic.

Who will be the conversation partners, formation leaders, and implementation team throughout this season?

- Staff
- Vestry
- Consider forming a dedicated task force for pandemic season, including focus on building use and physical in-person gatherings.
- Consider involving altar and flower guilds, vergers, ushers, and formation leaders in the discussion.
- Who else will be helpful in ongoing discernment and communication with your community?

Who will be the logistics partners? Specific logistical needs will emerge. Who will handle these with skill and discretion (where health information is concerned)?

2. Discern and Repeat

Why are we doing what we are doing?

Together with the practical considerations, we are called to a particular expression of God's purpose in our outposts of the Episcopal church. Staying focused on the initial question of "why are we doing what we're doing and how does it enhance our life as followers of Jesus?" may be helpful in choosing our activities in the upcoming months.

Consider the questions below¹ for reflection and discussion in clergy groups and with vestries, parish task forces, and our church communities at large:

Look Inward.

- What is our purpose? What are our core values?
- How does the activity we are contemplating express our purpose and core values? How does it undercut our purpose and core values?
- What does the action or change we are considering make possible?
- Whose needs are we prioritizing? Who will be left out of the activity we are contemplating? High-risk persons? Others?
- What intentional and unintentional formation might occur from the contemplated activity or choice?
- What are we longing for? What are different ways in which we might respond to such longing?
- What grief and anxiety do we need to create space to address? This can be general and in response to specific choices.
- How does the activity we are contemplating relate to the wider community, including people who do not have church as part of their lives?
- If we are feeling called to take risks for Jesus, what risks might we choose that do not implicate public health?
- If we are feeling called to keep discipline for Jesus, what disciplines we might choose that do not implicate public health?
- How does imagining this activity or change feel in our physical bodies? Tightness, spaciousness, clenching, butterflies...just notice. Are these sensations giving us information to consider?
- Congregational surveys may be helpful, both for data and to keep people engaged in the conversation. One free survey is available at <https://resources.gloo.us/carey/>. You may also design your own through Survey Monkey or a similar tool.

¹ Includes questions from “A Guide for Reflection and Planning: Transition from Season I to Season II,” The Episcopal Church in Colorado (April 2020); “Five Transformative Questions to Ask Before You Reopen Your Church (or After You’ve Done It)(May 2020), Carey Neiuwhof, <https://careynieuwhof.com/>.

Look Around.

- Who is at high-risk? COVID-19 appears to have disparate impact on people over age 65 years, people with certain pre-existing conditions including diabetes, high blood pressure, heart or lung conditions, obesity, asthma, and compromised immune systems, and Black and Hispanic persons (not because of their genetics, but rather because of decades of systemic racism and disparities that put them into high risk categories).²
- What is our insurance company telling us? Every shape of gathering or building use must include discussion with your parish's insurance company about its COVID-19 coverage policy and what is excluded from coverage.³
- What is current federal, state, and local (city, county) law and policy regarding business operations and gatherings at this time?
- How is COVID-19 affecting our geographic area at this time?
- What has been the trend over the last two weeks if these data are considered accurate? If the previous two weeks of data are still partial, consider using the previous two weeks. The Task Force is researching references for public health information and will share when available.
- At what types of events and venues is community spread being reported?
- What percentage of people have been tested in our county? Are asymptomatic persons being tested? Are there concerns about accuracy of testing data presented?

3. How will we handle the following situations?

- How will we ask people to report if they become infected? To whom will they report this information? How will the information be protected?
- In the event of a reported infection, who will contact those who may have been exposed to the virus?

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>

³ Please feel free to reach out to the COVID-19 Task Force and Diocesan staff with any questions about your discussions with your insurer.

- Note: prepare a script for communication of potential exposure that does not name any names.
- How will we handle persons who are not compliant with safety protocols?
- How will we handle a situation where too many people arrive for a particular offering? How will we tell a person they cannot stay? (Online signups in advance may mitigate this issue.)
- How will we handle persons who appear to be ill or become ill? Do we have a space designated to take such persons and a plan to assist in guiding their return home or to a safe place?
- Who within the parish will make the determination of whether the parish has experienced an outbreak, defined as more than three (3) reported infections at one time? What is the communication plan for closure due to COVID-19 outbreak?

II. Current Guidance for Church Physical In-Person Gatherings and Building Use

- Minimum Required Health Standards: **See the current Safer Standards Chart for indoor and outdoor gatherings, dated June 17, 2020 or as subsequently revised.**
- Nursery and Children's Activities.
 - No nursery at this time.
 - No children's activities at this time due to potential difficulties managing appropriate social distancing and hygiene. Children may be included in gatherings together with their families.
- Church Youth Activities. With vestry approval, youth may gather in accordance with the Safer Standards Chart, this Guidance, and Safeguarding God's Children standards.
- Space Preparation and Supplies:
 - Basic facilities maintenance protocols are especially important. This includes replacing all HVAC filters (furnace, air conditioning, air cleaner devices), increasing the frequency of filter replacement, and adjusting HVAC thermostat programming so that recycled air is not blowing when groups are gathering. This also includes fans or swamp coolers. Please refer to the CDC's guidance and recommended cleaning products at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>.
 - HVAC Use: Circulation of outdoor air *may* be helpful in reducing risk of virus exposure in an indoor space. Ask your HVAC maintenance team for any guidance regarding use of your specific HVAC system. Recommendations *may* include increasing outdoor air circulation and running the HVAC for periods of time when the space is unoccupied, but recommendations will be specific to your space and system. The [resource page](#) provided by the American

Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers may also be helpful.

- Cleaning and sanitizing surfaces is critical during this time with particular care given to doorknobs, door push bars, railings, bathrooms, pews, chairs, and other areas touched by human hands, before and after worship.
- Measure and mark off spaces for people/families/pods (as appropriate) to sit.
- Supplies:
 - Masks: Everyone over age two (2) must have one, even outdoors. May be removed outdoors as provided on the Safer Standards Chart, but each person must have a mask available. Church must have masks available to provide but should request people arrive with their own if they have them.
 - Hand sanitizer with at least 70% alcohol must be provided by the church and dispensed as provided on the Safer Standards Chart.
 - Disposable gloves for setup/takedown must be made available at the church. Gloves need not be worn during worship/in-person gatherings.
- Cleaning in between services/offerings if multiple in a single day:
 - If indoors, one option is to use different spaces for different offerings and close off after each use so no one space is used multiple times on one day.
 - Alternatively, arrange for deep cleaning of the utilized spaces by persons wearing PPE including N95 masks and gloves between gatherings.
 - If outdoors, ask those gathering to bring their own seating to reduce cleaning requirements.
 - Alternatively, arrange for cleaning of outdoor seating with bleach or sanitizing solution between uses.

- After gathering cleaning schedule options:
 - Where possible, after indoor space use, leave the buildings or used space closed and unattended for three (3) days before cleaning. This protects persons cleaning the space as the virus is unlikely to survive beyond three (3) days in such conditions.
 - Alternatively, deep cleaning of the utilized spaces by persons wearing PPE including N95 masks and gloves may occur any time after the gathering.
 - Outdoor benches, seating, and other items may be wiped down with bleach or sanitizing solution.
- Adjacent space use and cleaning schedule:
 - For example, if worship is offered in the nave and a bible study is to be offered the following day in a different room, the nave may be either (i) cleaned immediately after use or (ii) closed off until cleaning. The adjacent space may be used for bible study even if the nave has not yet been cleaned, so long as the nave and any other spaces used are closed off.
 - If restrooms are being used, these should be cleaned before each day's use or, if separate restrooms are available, designate one for use on one day and another for use on the subsequent day.
- Outbreak Protocol:
 - If an outbreak occurs, building use and gatherings will cease for fourteen (14) days from the date the outbreak was discovered.
 - Immediately report an outbreak to the office of Canon Alicia Schuster-Weltner and to the health department of the county in which your parish is located.
 - Any additional steps may be determined through discussion of the specific situation between your parish and Canon Alicia-Schuster Weltner.

- Team Preparation:
 - Draft and distribute reminders to all who are invited to attend physical in-person worship to please stay at home if they have had a fever (temperature of **100.4** °F or greater) or any symptoms of COVID-19 in the past three (3) days or have been exposed to anyone with these symptoms or anyone who may themselves have been exposed. Also, remind those invited of the protocols in place per these Guidelines.
 - Who will keep track of guests, contact information, and seating assignments?
 - Who will offer guidance to persons who are not complying with safety protocols?
 - Who will set up chairs (if needed), cordon off pews (if needed), measure and mark appropriate spacing? Confirm this person wears a mask and gloves for setup.
 - Who will clean up afterward, return items to indoor storage (if needed), and complete initial sanitization? Confirm this person wears a mask and gloves for takedown.
 - If offering multiple gatherings in a day or over a few days, consider rotating clergy and lay persons assisting with the gatherings in order to minimize each individual's potential exposure risk.

III. Contemplation, Imagination, Integration

This guidance applies to this moment and this moment will not last forever. Even if we cannot participate in certain sacraments right now in the way we long for, we are free to imagine what our sacraments might look like in different seasons of our experience with COVID-19. We may be called to work within our communities to

integrate experience of the pandemic into people's broader faith narratives. We hope to do some of this creative and theological work together.

For example, although we cannot participate in Eucharist in the usual ways just now, the Eucharist remains central to our theology and practice. What images of Eucharist are meaningful to you in our current context? What practices are you imagining going forward? What types of formation around Eucharist are we facilitating in our communities?

We encourage the creation of spaces for a season of spiritual formation through sharing and dialogue around our sacraments and church practice.

A note on preschools operated on parish properties. As preschools demand a specialized standard of care, please refer to the CDC's guidelines for childcare facilities and schools. You may find the Child Care Decision Tool, linked [here](#), helpful in deciding whether to open your preschool facility. CDC's safety standards for operating a preschool (the "[CDC Preschool Guidance](#)") at this time and until further notice are linked [here](#). Should your parish open its church-run preschool, a certification that the CDC Preschool Guidance is satisfied shall be submitted from the board of directors of such preschool and affirmed by the parish vestry, to the Bishop's office and shall be updated in the event of a substantial revision of the CDC Preschool Guidance or upon request of the Bishop's office.

For additional information, including with respect to church offices, pastoral care, and community engagement ministries, please continue to refer to the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta's [Current Situation Summary](#), posted under COVID-19 resources at <https://www.episcopalatlanta.org/covid-19/>.