



GUIDELINES & QUESTIONS FOR A RETURN TO IN-PERSON WORSHIP

The Episcopal Diocese
of East Tennessee

COVID-19 Task Force



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF EAST TENNESSEE COVID-19 TASK FORCE

Guidelines & Questions For A Return to In-Person, Public Worship

The ministry of a diocese is a collaborative ministry, shared among Bishop, clergy and lay people as all work together for the mission and ministry of the church in each local context. The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us in many ways of how connected we are as the people of God, and how important our shared ministry is. We are a body, as St. Paul taught the Corinthians, and our responsibility to each other and to the communities in which we live is both enhanced and tested by times of crisis. While we have not been in our church buildings these past several weeks, we have been challenged to find new and creative ways to continue to care for souls. The need for physical distancing has taken a toll on all of us—emotionally, spiritually, financially, and physically. A global public health crisis has required all of us to do deeper spiritual work, too.

COVID-19 has changed the landscape of how we gather, in immediate and acute ways—but also in ways that have implications for the longer term. Even as we share the desire of many to gather in person and resume public worship, we know that our responsibility to care for others demands that we proceed with caution, taking steps in line with the best public health guidance available. This document lays out an approach for re-opening and resuming ministries, without suggesting a certain timeline. The timeline will become clearer as the situation on the ground in East Tennessee develops, and as we receive continued guidance from public health officials on when it is safe and prudent to gather in small (and eventually, in larger) groups. (In addition, we must acknowledge that this is not necessarily a linear process. Should the curve of COVID-19 infections again rise, we may be unable to move directly through the seasons of this document.) The document goes on to suggest particular questions for reflection on the part of parish leadership, questions designed to be answered in consultation with the Bishop and with regard for the variety of contexts in which our parishes and worshiping communities gather.

Finally, people who are at greater risk of infection, including those who are over 65 years of age or have underlying medical conditions, should be encouraged to remain at home. This reality makes all the more critical that we continue and make even more robust communal offerings through social media and online platforms that keep all our people connected.



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Season I: Sheltering in Place

In person public Worship and Gatherings are suspended.

Parish Offices are closed for public use.

Pastoral Visits primarily occur by phone or physically distanced.

Outreach ministries providing essential community services operate only if able to observe social distancing and public health guidelines.

Season II: Proceeding with Caution

Clergy along with parish leadership, in consultation with the Bishop, will develop a parish plan for reopening to in-person Public Worship. It will be important for these plans to be flexible, adjusting the plan as community and public health guidelines continue to shift as COVID-19 positive cases rise and fall.

Parishes desiring to do so begin to offer public gatherings, with plans to limit the attendance at each service to the number of persons who can safely gather in their spaces while observing physical distancing guidelines.

Parish offices reopen, with plans to limit the number of persons in the office as necessary to observe physical distancing guidelines.

Parishes which have been offering a digital option for worship continue to do so, recognizing the number of higher-risk members who will need to continue to self-isolate for some time.

Consider what other parish churches are doing and, where appropriate, direct people within your parish to those offerings, as well as your own. In other words, seek ways to collaborate between parishes so the additional burden of in-person and online offerings is sustainable and life-giving.

Parish leaders (lay and ordained) model best practices such as wearing masks and observing physical distancing guidelines. For example:

- Ushers stand at least six feet from the entrances, creating ways to offer bulletins and other materials without having to distribute these documents by hand. Consider creating a welcome table. Do not reuse bulletins.
- Offering plates are not passed; an alternative for depositing offerings in a convenient place is made available.



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- The peace is passed without physical contact among members. Please be creative in how you model ways to pass the peace safely, such as a sacred bow. Consider using the peace as an opportunity to teach those gathered how we remain a body while keeping safe distance.
- Consideration should be given, based on the space and size of your choir, whether they will be able to sing, given the requirements of physical distancing. Consider limiting musical offerings to soloists or duets for a time.

Parishes develop a plan for how to monitor and maintain the integrity of their COVID-19 safety plan. Who will be responsible for seeing protocols set by the parish are honored? How will this be done in a clear, pastoral, and loving way? Consideration should be given to appointing a trusted member in the parish as a COVID-19 plan overseer.

Clergy resume pastoral visits to low-risk parishioners, while being mindful of their own health (for their own sake and for the sake of those they visit).

Parishes consider whether it is possible to offer food service and hospitality safely in a way that meets physical distancing guidelines.

Season III: Finding a New Normal

Parish offices are open, while still maintaining best practices about hand-washing, regular cleaning of public space.

Public worship is offered, in continued consultation with the Bishop.

Parishes consider how to continue offering digital worship and formation for those members who continue to self-isolate. Parishes not able to maintain such offerings may commend the offerings of neighboring parishes who are offering them, while continuing to provide appropriate pastoral connection for their own members.

Pastoral visits by clergy and laypersons (who are well) resume. Wellness screening, as appropriate, is done by those persons responsible for pastoral care intake.

Lay pastoral volunteers should not visit persons exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms. Questions to consider before visiting include—

1. Do you currently have a temperature of 99.5 or higher?
2. Do you currently have a cough or any type of respiratory illness?
3. Have you or anyone in your household been in close contact with anyone who has been confirmed or presumed as having COVID-19?



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Season IV: Incorporate Learnings from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Parishes incorporate learned best practices from all the seasons of pandemic response. Examples include, but are not limited to, consideration of food service protocols, reconsideration of the rhetoric used regarding communicable disease and the common cup, etc.

Checklist of Questions for Consideration

The Diocese of East Tennessee COVID-19 Task Force offers these questions for consideration as parishes make their plans for seasons two and three:

1. What are the dynamics and demographics of your community?
 - Who do you serve? Commuters, local neighborhood? Are there youth groups, seniors, study groups? What about outside groups that use your space: Twelve Step groups, food pantries, etc.? How do you communicate with each of these groups?
2. What is the best space to gather? Nave, Parish hall, outside?
 - Have you considered alternatives to the nave? Would the parish hall, parlor, or outdoor garden work?
3. How do we enter and exit using one-way traffic and social distancing?
Can social events (such as coffee hour) happen with social distancing?
 - How will ushers and other volunteers be trained to ensure that worshipers are welcomed and assured of safety at the same time? What about signage/ electronic/Sunday bulletin information? Would a Zoom coffee hour or Bible Study work in your community?
4. How do we explain and maintain social distancing with children?
 - What is the role of parents, Sunday School teachers and clergy? What language/strategies/tactics can be used so that children feel safe and included during gathering times? How do you teach them about God in a time of pandemic?
5. How many services can you sustain on one Sunday or Saturday?
 - Are there different types of liturgies that can be provided at different times to spread out those attending? Eucharist, Daily Office, Taizé, Choral? Are there people other than clergy to serve as worship leaders?



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6. Will services need reservation lists and more logistical coordination? Who does that?

- Do congregants “sign up” to attend? How do we deal with newcomers and seekers? Are we convinced that our “regulars” will continue, or give up?

7. How do we pastorally deal with people acting out or ignoring protocol?

- What is the role of the clergy/vestry with regard to safety without seeming heavy-handed?

8. How do we incorporate visitors?

- Is there a place for evangelism during this time? Can social media play a role? How do clergy and laity make connection with those who are interested in the church or its work? How do we maintain a spirit of welcome in a time of fear of the unknown and uncertainty?

9. How do we offer Sacraments and sacramental rites?

- Will we have to diminish all sacramental rites during this time? How long a season before we offer a common cup? (Please remember that this is an opportunity to teach your parish members that they are fully communed if they receive only the bread. Morning Prayer or Ante-communion also remain valid and appropriate for Sunday worship in this season). How will parish policies regarding weddings need change in this time? In a time when burial offices and funerals are increasingly only graveside only, how do we continue to create spaces for the wider parish to grieve their dead?

In this season, no document will be perfected to the point that all our questions are answered and all our anxieties are calmed. So, we will need to practice a deeper listening to each other and a deeper care in how we speak to each other, discerning together how best to stay faithful to our common baptismal vows.

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” -Philippians 4:8-9 (NRSV)