

Best Practices for Planning a Return to In-Person Worship



THE DIOCESE OF
SOUTH CAROLINA

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN SOUTH CAROLINA

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Best Practices for Planning a Return to In-Person Worship

Public Health Guidelines

Before any plans are made, please review the federal, state, and local rules that apply to your congregation, as well as recommendations from the Standing Committee of the Diocese of South Carolina. These policies will change in the months to come. What seems appropriate today or next week, may not apply in a month or in six months. If circumstances change, we will need to change as well, which may include returning to “home or work” orders or limits on the number of people who may gather.

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What follows are points to consider in advance of offering in-person worship. The list is not exhaustive. It is meant to guide a Rector/Priest-in-Charge and Vestry/Mission Council as they plan to return to in-person worship. Setting expectations, sharing plans in advance, and encouraging everyone to adopt the new norms will help make the return to in-person worship joyful, meaningful, and safe.

When planning for the re-opening of services, it will be the responsibility of each Rector/Priest-in-Charge, in consultation with the Vestry/Mission Council, to evaluate the vulnerability of their congregation and implement appropriate procedures to reduce the risk of spreading the coronavirus among parishioners and staff. Additionally, it will be up to each individual to accept responsibility for their own health and safety as well as those with whom they worship.

Best Practices for Planning a Return to In-Person Worship

Consider a Phased Approach

As we recognize this new reality, consideration should be given to not trying to get “back to normal” too quickly. A phased approach may provide necessary room for adaptation to new norms of worship and gathering. Based on a congregation’s particular setting, it may be wise to begin with smaller gatherings and grow incrementally with planned phases. Morning Prayer could also be considered as a way to begin a phased approach.

Continue Online Options

Even when in-person worship is possible, some within our communities will be appropriately concerned about returning. It will be helpful to continue practices developed during the “home or work” policy ordered by our Governor, whether that is continuing to create online offerings or encouraging the congregation to attend other diocesan or TEC online worship. While you are encouraged to continue online services if able, you are asked to consider your personal workload, and that of your staff, to evaluate whether this is possible. The Standing Committee and Diocesan staff will continue to offer resources for the foreseeable future to assist in this transition.

Worshipping Together

Before returning to worship in a confined space, determine the recommended Emergency Maximum Occupancy Rate published by State and Federal guidelines which is the lesser of 5 persons per 1000 square feet or 20 percent of your normal occupancy as determined by the Fire Marshall. The return to in-person worship in a confined space should also include:

- keeping at least six feet circumference between all persons who do not live in the same household, and
- wearing masks whenever in an enclosed space.

This spacing is also recommended for any contact our parishioners may have. Most dioceses recommend fellowship time without beverages or food. Wherever possible, it is recommended that meetings, services and fellowship events are held outdoors. This will not prevent people from talking to one another, but it may reduce the opportunity for unsafe behaviors. The goal is to facilitate safe interaction with one another. Controlling the behavior of an adult may prove to be problematic. The responsibility for keeping at least six feet between persons lies with each individual. It may be helpful to name the norms for these types of gatherings, ask everyone to abide by them, and even request people not participate if they cannot.



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Sanitizing the Church

All hard surfaces should be cleaned before inviting others into the worship space, between a series of worship services, and immediately after any gathering. It is recommended that a thorough final cleaning take place after all but the designated cleaning team have left the church grounds. The CDC's cleaning and sanitizing instructions may be found on their website at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>.

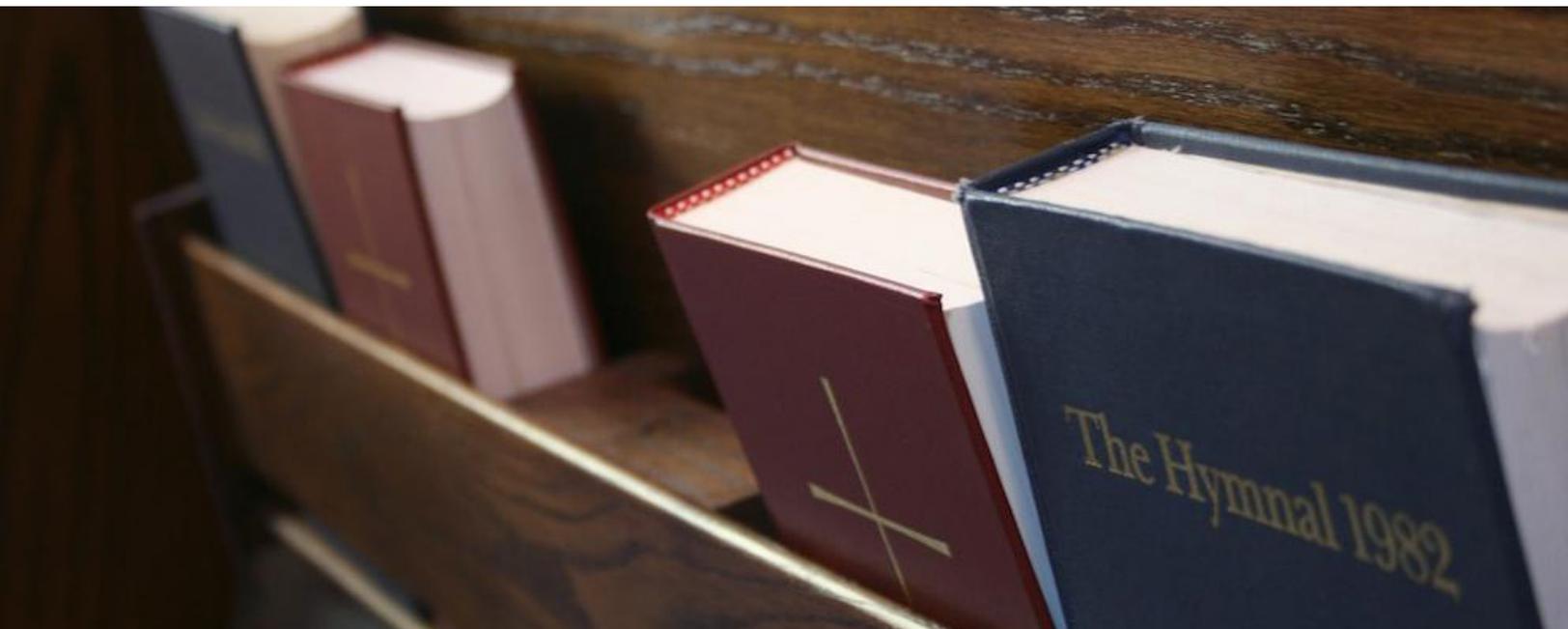
Greeting and Handouts

Printed materials may be necessary for worship and to provide a proper welcome to parishioners. Worship materials could also be shared electronically. Consider having a welcome table outside your worship space with the necessary bulletins and other information. A socially-distant greeter or usher may be helpful to assist with welcome and any necessary instructions.

To avoid having people touch door handles/knobs, the church doors could be kept open during the first and last 15 minutes of worship. Please keep in mind that this practice may conflict with previously established safety guidelines, so an usher or other parishioner may be assigned to keep watch for security concerns while church doors remain open.

Prayer Books, Hymnals, and Other Pew Literature

Initial studies show that the virus can live on paper products (which include prayer books and hymnals) from hours to days. Remove the need for common use of these books by including everything people will need to participate fully in the service in handouts that can be taken home after worship or recycled, but not re-used or passed from one individual to another. Please consider removing prayer books and hymnals to prevent use by parishioners. The same consideration should be made during this period for other items in common areas such as pencils and paper material.



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Outdoor Services

Where appropriate and safe distancing can be maintained, outdoor services may be a practical alternative. Keep in mind that safe distancing standards will still apply to keep everyone safe.

Music

Sacred music is an integral part of worship for Episcopalians. Unfortunately, singing has been identified by the Centers for Disease Control as a particular concern for spreading COVID-19. Therefore, consideration of how or if we sing and utilize vocal music in our worship is of great importance. When worshipping with a choir, extra consideration should be given to the spacing between members and the distance of those members to others in the church. During this transition, consider forgoing a choir or minimizing risk by using section leaders, duets, or soloists. In addition, singing while masked is problematic. Instrumental music is also a valid option.

Passing the Peace

Continue touch-free greetings at the peace. Clergy and lay leaders in worship should consider modeling a wave or a bow while staying in place.

Offering Plates

Consider having offering plates in conspicuous and stationary places so individual offerings can be placed conveniently without passing them. In advance of worship, a parish might offer the alternative of online giving or mailing in checks.

Receiving Communion

Communion of One Kind in the Bread is to be practiced until further notice. When communion is offered, establish a plan for safe administration that minimizes person-to-person contact and explains how proper sanitization will occur throughout administration. Consider how communicants can receive communion one at a time while maintaining social distance.

Worship for Children, Children's Ministries, and Nurseries

Unfortunately, resuming in-person children's ministries and nurseries may be difficult in that enforcement of proper social distancing and safety could be impossible. Therefore, until circumstances change dramatically, it is recommended that online resources are utilized, and congregations consider creative adaptations for contact with children and families during this time of isolation. Vacation Bible School is a perfect example of how a congregation could move to an online format. The Diocesan Office and parishes with existing ministries with children and families are available to assist with resources for online formation.

Additionally, church schools should consider following the guidelines provided by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in determining the steps for safe operation. These guidelines and resources are available at this link: <https://www.scdhec.gov/infectious-diseases/viruses/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/schools-childcare-centers-covid-19>

Best Practices for Planning a Return to In-Person Worship

Correct Unsafe Practices

It is recommended that safe practices are best taught in advance and by example; that congregations remind all in the parish that each person is responsible for themselves, as well as others. Establish a widely-shared plan for what may need to happen if someone appears ill, or if there is an uncomfortable situation regarding health safety. Consider tasking parishioners, ushers or vestry persons who have the gift of offering a gracious word with giving guidance to those who struggle to change their behavior.

Make and Revisit a Plan Regularly

Make a plan, carry it out, and then have recurrent follow-up meetings to reflect on how it went and what needs to change. Make adjustments as necessary based on experience and circumstances.

Work Through the Diocesan Office and Your Local Deanery

The Standing Committee, in conjunction with the Diocesan Office, will work in consultation with the deans and congregations to assist during this process. The Standing Committee will pass along best practices of other dioceses and collaborate with the Diocesan Office and deans so that any questions or concerns can be answered expeditiously. All are encouraged to share ideas with each other, our deaneries, and the diocese.



In conclusion, safe return to in-person worship services will take **thorough planning by church leadership.**

A Planning Guide that should assist in this effort is included on **pages 7-8.**



Planning Guide for Congregations

A safe return to in-person worship will require a period of intentional planning within congregations. The questions below may be helpful as a guide to this important preparation.

1. Evaluate the vulnerability of your congregation using the definitions provided by the CDC. How will you address those who are in the vulnerable category who attend at a higher risk?
2. How many members may worship at one time in your sanctuary according to the Federal and State guidelines for determining the Emergency Maximum Occupancy Rate and maintaining a 6-foot circumference between family units? If the number is less than the size of the congregation, how will you provide services for everyone? How will you handle visitors and unexpected guests?
3. If you have a choir, how will you make sure they have room to maintain the current safety protocols?
4. How will you make sure the church is sanitized before and after each service?
5. Do you plan on having bulletins available? If so, how will you distribute them?
6. What is your plan for items in the pew racks and/or other common areas?
7. How will you conduct communion and the passing of the peace, keeping in mind the distancing and other recommendations of the CDC?
8. What will your process be for collecting the offering?
9. How will you minister to the needs of children and families?
10. How will you ensure social distancing standards are followed at church gatherings?
11. How will you advertise and maintain the procedures everyone must follow – both to regular members and to visitors?
12. How will you handle those who do not abide by the safety procedures you have in place?
13. What other precautions will you take and what processes have you put in place to periodically review this plan?



Planning Guide for Congregations: Resources

Our diocese—our people and our congregations—will continually strive to follow the advice of public health experts and best practices in planning the activities and worship of our diocese.

Resources:

[The Coronavirus Webpage for the Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\):](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

[Johns Hopkins' Coronavirus Resource Center:](https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/)

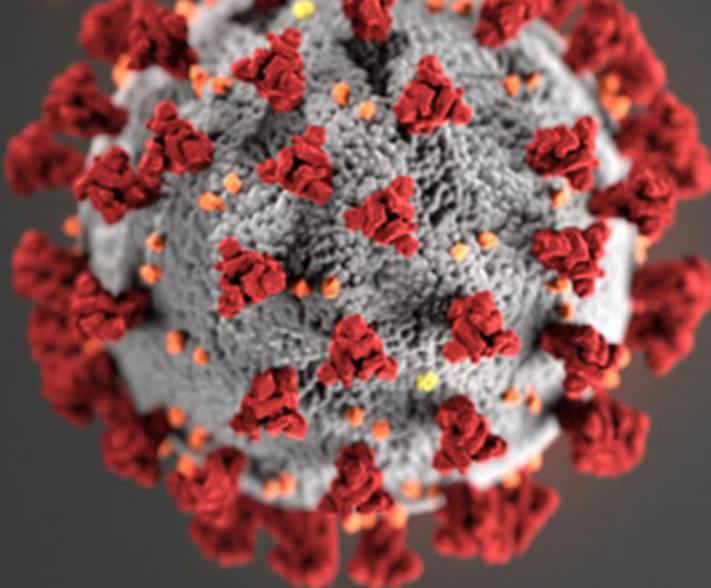
<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>

[South Carolina DHEC Coronavirus Resource Page:](https://www.scdhec.gov/infectious-diseases/viruses/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19)

<https://www.scdhec.gov/infectious-diseases/viruses/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19>

[Safety Tips for Religious Organizations from Church Pension Group \(CPG\):](https://www.cpg.org/globalassets/documents/publications/cic-coronavirus-safety-tips-for-religious-organizations.pdf)

<https://www.cpg.org/globalassets/documents/publications/cic-coronavirus-safety-tips-for-religious-organizations.pdf>



Appendix

CDC Guidelines for Faith-Based Organizations

The CDC has developed guidelines for community and faith-based organizations. Review these precautions when developing your plan. They can be found on the CDC website at these links: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html> and <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>.

Definition of High-Risk or Vulnerable Individuals

The CDC defines high-risk or vulnerable individuals to the Coronavirus as:

- People 65 years and older
- People who live in a nursing home or long-term care facility
- People of all ages with underlying medical conditions, particularly if not well controlled, including:
 - People with chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
 - People who have serious heart conditions
 - People who are immunocompromised
- Many conditions can cause a person to be immunocompromised, including cancer treatment, smoking, bone marrow or organ transplantation, immune deficiencies, poorly controlled HIV or AIDS, and prolonged use of corticosteroids and other immune weakening medications
- People with severe obesity (body mass index [BMI] of 40 or higher)
- People with diabetes
- People with chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis
- People with liver disease

Appendix

Additional CDC Guidelines

The CDC has also published the following guidelines to protect yourself and others from the virus.

Everyone should:

Wash your hands often

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

Avoid close contact

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home as much as possible.
- Put distance between yourself and other people.
- Remember that some people without symptoms may be able to spread virus.
- Keeping distance from others is especially important for people who are at higher risk of getting very sick.

Cover your mouth and nose with a cloth face cover when around others

- You could spread COVID-19 to others even if you do not feel sick.
- Everyone should wear a cloth face cover when they have to go out in public, for example to the grocery store or to pick up other necessities.
- Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.
- The cloth face cover is meant to protect other people in case you are infected.
- Do NOT use a facemask meant for a healthcare worker.
- Continue to keep about 6 feet between yourself and others. The cloth face cover is not a substitute for social distancing.

Cover coughs and sneezes

- If you are in a private setting and do not have on your cloth face covering, remember to always cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze or use the inside of your elbow.
- Throw used tissues in the trash.
- Immediately wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not readily available, clean your hands with a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.

Clean and disinfect

- Clean AND disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily. This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks.
- If surfaces are dirty, clean them. Use detergent or soap and water prior to disinfection. Then, use a household disinfectant. Most common EPA-registered household disinfectants will work.